

DESCRIPTION OF THESIS

The news media and the political public relations industry are linked in numerous ways and any change in their relationship has many repercussions, not just for those in the political news industry, but for society and democracy in the UK as a whole. Neither political PRs nor journalists can function effectively without the other and each relies upon the other to enhance their importance. They are both powerful groups but without the other their power is impaired and their ability to succeed is significantly reduced.

The extent of this relationship on public life and society in the UK means that an analysis of these relationships is essential to understand just who the political gatekeeper is in the early 21st century.

This thesis utilises interviews with professional practitioners in the political news industry to investigate the role of political journalists within the news media and the role of political PRs in the political public relations industry. It then establishes the extent and nature of the relationship between these two groups. The implications of this relationship are then analysed to determine whether it is possible for the news media to facilitate their role in democratic life in the UK.

The thesis concludes that, as a result of all the changes in the news media and the dramatic growth in size and power of the political public relations industry, there is no longer a single political gatekeeper and that in fact political PRs and journalists conduct a collusive conflictual relationship. It presents a situation where not only are journalists hindered in carrying out the news media's democratic obligations but the news media is, as a whole, no longer able to effectively defend their obligations and journalists are failing in their role as a watchdog.

**Whose news:
Who is the political news gatekeeper in the
early 21st Century?**

Josephine Rosa Perry

**Submitted for the degree of PhD in Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
University of London**

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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Abstract of Thesis

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Title of thesis: Whose News: Who is the political gatekeeper in the early 21st Century?

Degree: PhD Media and Communications

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

*John Humphreys*¹: Does any of this matter now, all this, all these months later? The war's been fought and won.

*Andrew Gilligan*²: Well, the 45 minutes wasn't just a detail, it did go to the heart of the government's case that Saddam was an imminent threat and it was repeated four times in the dossier, including by the Prime Minister himself, in the foreword: so I think it probably does matter. Clearly, you know, if, if it was, if it was wrong, things do, things are, got wrong in good faith, but if they knew it was wrong before they actually made the claim, that's perhaps a bit more serious.

John Humphreys: Andrew, many thanks; more about that later...

(Transcript from the Today programme. Radio 4, 29 May 2003).

What a prediction that was. Not only was there 'more about that later,' there was more about it for many weeks, months and even years to come. That short interview, on a non-descript May morning, claiming the case for the Iraq war had been made by a dodgy dossier, turned into a political-media showdown culminating in the 'Hutton enquiry' – an event which pushed the issue of just who controls the news, right onto the front page.

The debate over who controls the news is not new. It stems around who has the power to dictate what citizens and the public consider to be news? Who holds the opinions of what is important to be shared? Who has the power to choose the stories which will educate citizens on the public affairs of the day? Who, in short, is the political news gatekeeper? The group that have this power not only have a significant role to play in influencing the public, but also in setting public opinion and taking a potentially influential role in democracy in general.

1.1 Introduction

A common quote (most often attributed to Enoch Powell) closely links politics and the news media saying that "for a politician to complain about the press is like a ship's captain complaining about the sea". Whilst this would have said this in the 1960s it could justifiably be said about the situation

¹ John Humphreys is the presenter of the Today programme, BBC Radio 4

² Andrew Gilligan was a journalist on the Today programme, BBC Radio 4.

today. Politicians and the press are linked in many ways – both physically and psychologically. Neither can function without the other and each relies upon the other to enhance their importance. Alone, they could function but their output would not be effective, relevant or contain democratic reverence. When they work separately their power can be impaired and their potential capacity for persuasion significantly reduced. The interdependency between the groups can then impact significantly on their relationship but also upon public life and society in the UK. As a result, the ability to understand these relationships becomes essential to appreciate the intricacies of public life.

Public life in the UK is based on an assumption of representative democracy. It is on this foundation that politicians stand for office. Guaranteeing and protecting the functioning of this democracy is the news media's regular, and historical, justification for their presence in politics. The health of democratic society in the UK is then strongly influenced by the ability of politicians to represent the public, and by the ideal that the news media oversee the activities of politicians. In order to provide the UK with a democratic health check, it is necessary to study the relationships between those in the news media and politics. This thesis aims to do just that. Through interviews with professional practitioners it investigates the role of political journalists within the news media, the role of political PRs in the political public relations industry and analyses the relationship between the two groups. It establishes the extent and nature of the relationship and debates the implications of this, upon the role and ability of the political news media to interact effectively in democratic life in the UK.

Democratic decision making in the UK has historically focused on three political estates: the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Church. Within the last century however, two of these estates (the Church and the Lords) now hold mainly symbolic powers ensuring that Montesquieu's famous system to allow each to act as a check and balance on the power and self-interest of the others (Held, 1996: 82-88) fails. Instead, a news media is needed to play a significant role, watching over all estates in an autonomous way to ensure they do not overstep their constitutional roles or authority. In giving them the title the 'Fourth Estate' (attributed to Edmund Burke), in political coverage, this could require the news media not only to cover political speeches or comments from politicians but also to hold officials accountable and to expose official corruption, scandals and government failures (Norris, 2000: 20).

From this democratically based outlook, the supply of news by journalists could be classed as a public necessity, a facilitator of the purest form of representative democracy. Looking from an economic outlook however, the supply of news by journalists could be also classed a transaction between a news media organization and a member of the public to buy the information on offer. The supply of information to journalists can also follow this trend – either as an altruistic act on the part of the

source, simply wanting the public to have the fullest and most accurate knowledge in which to make their political decisions or as a selfish act designed to influence the journalist into portraying their interests favourably. Researchers on the news media have considered these motives and analysing the political economy of the news media: its importance, power and control, have interested many researchers as they have considered the way processes are utilised to influence the societies in which the news media embeds.

This thesis sets out to find out how effective the news media are at fulfilling their expected roles and responsibilities in an economically focused media sector whilst having to interact with politicians (and their PR people) who have become strongly attuned to the ways and means of the political journalist. Political PRs have taken over much of the politicians interaction which politicians used to make with the news media and many are employed simply to liaise with journalists, to ensure their employer is portrayed in the most positive light and protect them from negative news coverage. The political PR, rarely seen in the political news industry 30 years ago, now has a prominent role and has gained a large amount of power and influence. They have been named by some as the 'Fifth Estate',³ overseeing the fourth estate journalists who oversee their employers (Franklin, 1998: 4). The power of this new 'fifth estate' has created a new dynamic in the political news industry, made a significant impact upon the way political journalists are able to do their jobs and, as such, seems highly worthy of investigation. In short, this thesis will work from the perspective that the relationship between those working for the news media (political journalists) and the politicians (political PRs) could provide a key to explaining who holds the power in the political news industry.

Whilst there has been much research in the past about the role of political journalists, and a great amount of debate more recently over the role of political PRs, a decisive answer to who actually holds the balance of power in the relationship, and thus acts as the political news gatekeeper, has not been forthcoming. To go some way towards answering this it is necessary to explore the identity of the two potential power holders, investigate the industry in which they work and analyse the implications of their existence on British democratic public life.

1.2 Aims

Investigating relationships across separate, yet related, industries gives the research a mixture of aims. Some simply set up the research by identifying the theories and concepts behind the research field as a

³ The title of the 'fifth estate' has been claimed by many groups (bloggers, public journalists, podcasters, NGOs) yet it appears to be most apt for those who are overseeing and watching those who themselves are tasked with overseeing; those watching, correcting and influencing the fourth estate.

whole. Others provide further knowledge about elements of political public relations which should lead to a consideration and, hopefully, an understanding of the relationship and power struggles that take place on a daily basis between journalists and political PRs. Overall, I aim to understand the strength of the impact on the fourth estate by the fifth estate. Where is the balance of power? If the balance of power is found to be flowing more heavily towards the political PR, away from the journalist, then it indicates there is a need for a serious discussion of the implications of this upon the journalists' fourth estate responsibilities, and the other expectations placed upon them, in British public life.

My initial aim is to set the theoretical context for my research. I intend to locate and debate the theories and concepts that have been employed to analyse the relationships between political journalists and PRs. Starting from a gatekeeping theory, I intend to discuss the development of the notion from a single dimension, one way flow, through to a concept which matches today's industry of complexity, multi-directional flows, overseen by a trained and socialised workforce. In considering the roles and responsibilities of those working across the industry I will discuss the expectations; both democratic and populist, the concerns around in whose interest each member of the sector works and the aspirations which come across through the professionalism displayed. Rounding off with a dissection of some of the critiques around using the gatekeeping theory as a valid context, I hope to provide a rounded debate on the value of gatekeeping as a tool for understanding who is in control of political news today.

The next aim will involve conducting an historical analysis to build up to a scene setting of the political news industry today. The ambition is to provide a pen portrait of how, and when, political journalism began, the pressure points leading to political PR being created and the subsequent growth of the political news industry.

Next, I will focus specifically at the political news media. I want to consider the changes in the news media industry since the research that Tunstall undertook in the late 1960s and then probe how these changes have affected the journalists working within it. In particular, I want to consider how the changes to the industry have affected the day-to-day role of the journalist. Next I aim to consider political public relations. I initially want to establish the structure of political media relations as an industry and then to develop a profile of the typical 'political PR'. These two aims should provide the background for my next ambition: to build up an understanding of the relationships which develop between those working across the political public relations structure. Finally, alongside the work on the actual relationship, I want to highlight and illuminate the range and extent of the procedures, tactics and technologies used in this relationship by political PRs in their quest to influence journalists.

Once the role of journalists within the news media and the role of the political PR in the political public relations industry is set out, it will be essential to undertake two further steps. The first is to investigate the role of power and influence dependency in the political news industry and the second is to conduct a full investigation of the current relationship between journalists and political PRs. Once this has been achieved, it should be possible to undertake an analysis and appraisal of who has the upper hand in this relationship and the elements by which this relationship is controlled.

1.3 Research questions

The most significant question to be asked considers the two main sectors in the political news industry (news media and politics), the relationship between those working in each sector (political journalists and political PRs) and the impact of this relationship on the wider society. To get to this point however it is first necessary to consider the two sectors separately by assessing: the current situation within the political news media and then how this affects political public relations. Once the two groups have been placed in context the stage will be set to investigate their relationship and the bonds they have with each other. It is the points that arise here which feed so aptly into the main research question, the question which provides the basis for this research.

Main research question

- Whose news: Who is the political news gatekeeper in the early 21st century?

Supplementary research questions

- How have changes in the political news media industry affected the working lives of political journalists?
- How do political organisations incorporate the modern news media processes and requirements into their communication organisation, strategy and policies?
- What is the current nature of the relationship between political journalists and political PRs?
- How does the current relationship between political journalists and PRs affect the ability of the news media to be a fourth estate?

1.4 Inspiration for research

Behind any study there are two types of reasons for setting out on the research journey. Positive ones; explaining why the study was started and what new facts or theories the researcher is looking to

discover, and retrospective ones; those which critique earlier research in the discipline with the aim of improving or updating it. A PhD study needs both types of reasons in order to ensure interest in the subject can be held for the length of the study.

From the positive perspective three reasons constitute my rationale for embarking on this research. The first is enveloped in a personal quest to understand just what news is. Much research has been conducted on the nature of news, its role, whether it simply follows events (Lawrence 2000: 9), whether events follow it (Boorstin, 1977: 11) or whether it is simply a style of genre. Many researchers (Galtung and Ruge (1965) in particular) have worked to categorise which stories and information will be guaranteed to make the news, yet much of this research actually considers 'news' as an abstract notion rather than an amalgamation of many efforts from many people. Whilst many studies have focused on the people responsible for producing the news into its final format (to be published or broadcast) far fewer have looked further back down the chain, to where many news stories originate. Lippman said that "the news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself" (Lippman, 1922: 216). He raises a highly salient point. News is not necessarily what is going on around the public, but something (an event, information, gossip) which has come to a journalist's attention, inspiring them to produce a story about it. News does not leap out at a journalist; something, or more often, someone, must bring that news to the attention of the journalist. That someone holds a lot of power and has a lot of influence. This power and influence can be found in abundance in the political world. Therefore, if we were to analyse fully 'what is news,' and beyond this, 'what is political news', it is essential that we step behind the scenes and investigate these people, these sources. Today these sources would, in the political world, be known as political PRs.

My second reason for conducting this research is that I work in the political communications industry. I am currently a political consultant and have in the past worked as a journalist and as a public relations practitioner in the political and legal arenas. The relationship between those in the political news industry fascinates me. The news media and political industries have grown significantly from Lippman's time and there are now many more players; politicians (from every level – cabinet to backbench, parliamentary to borough councillors), political journalists, news editors, editors, media owners, special advisors, civil service press officers, members of the party hierarchy, the party communication staff, press officers and those on the periphery; PR agencies, think tanks, media commentators and advertisers. The two most interesting, most secretive groups in my experience however make up a smaller 'political news industry'. These are the political PRs (who I am defining as special advisors, civil service press officers and party communication staff) and the political journalists. These groups have their own codes, their own tactics and, although much of the rest of the

media world is based in Soho or Canary Wharf, they inhabit a few small buildings stretching less than a mile from the Cabinet Office, Downing Street and the Foreign Office on Whitehall, past Portcullis House and the MoD on Parliament Square, past the Commons and the Lords, glancing at College Green and finishing at 4 Millbank – the political broadcast studios. This short distance hosts the offices of the elite of political journalism, politics and political PR. This is the ‘Westminster Village’. Working in such close proximity, with both sides often holding mutually exclusive objectives, but also some mutually inclusive objectives (such as filling news schedules with political news), the relationship between the two groups has many levels and is of importance to those interested not only in the media, but also those with an interest in politics, democracy, philosophy, sociology and psychology.

My final positive reason is that, for many people working in politics, in any aspect at all, what strikes at their core is the notion of power. Not necessarily wanting power per se, but wanting to understand where it comes from, its potential drivers, its value. Power in politics, and power through the news media, seem to be strongly connected and, in his book *Why Study the Media*, Roger Silverstone explains many of the links:

“It is all about power, of course. In the end. The power the media have to set an agenda. The power they have to destroy one. The power they have to influence and change the political process. The power to enable to inform. The power to deceive. The power to shift the balance of power: between state and citizen: between country and country; between producer and consumer. And the power that they are denied; by the state, by the market, by the resistant or resisting audience, citizen, consumer. It is all about ownership and control: the who and the what and the how of it. And it is about the drip, drip drip of ideology as well as the shock of the luminous event. It is about the media’s power to create and sustain meanings; to persuade, endorse and reinforce. The power to undermine and reassure.”

(Silverstone, 1999:143)

Who, after reading this, could not be inspired to want to study the ways in which power is intricately linked with the media? As the media is moving ever further into the space of politics, the way power is wielded and the way it is balanced is becoming a more and more important question for the political researcher. As strong party identification is fading (for more see Franklin, 1984, Rose and McAllister, 1986 or Crewe, Sarlvik and Alt, 1977) the news media take on a stronger and more influential role in shaping the way the public view politicians and politics. As politics relies more on promotional

tactics⁴, in the way that movie studios contend for audiences (Wernick, 1991), the news media get ever more powerful and important in politics (Scammell, 2000: 170). These individual elements are merging to make the news media more entwined in politics, and more influential upon it, than ever before. The way this balance is changing, particularly in the last 30 years, to a situation where the news media are increasingly seen as not only transcribers of the news but also the makers of it, creates the perfect timing and background for a project with this focus.

The first significant piece of research considering these questions about power and balance in the UK political news media industry was conducted by the sociologist, Jeremy Tunstall⁵. He analysed the way that journalists work in general but also looked specifically at the Westminster Lobby Correspondents and, in doing so, was able to capture their background, the ways they worked on a day to day basis, their interaction with press officers and their levels of trust towards official information. It is the resulting book of this research, *The Westminster Lobby Correspondents* (1970) that added to the inspiration behind this thesis.

When looking at a few of Tunstall's headline points, the balance of power in 1970 seems heavily swayed in favour of the journalists. Tunstall asked his interviewees (Lobby Correspondents) about their relationships with politicians (this research took place before the political PR as would be recognised now was created) and their interaction with press officers. When he asked his respondents which side helped who out more, about half said journalists helped the sources more (46%) and about half again said it was about equal (51%). Only one respondent thought journalists helped sources more (Tunstall, 1970: 44). When he asked journalists about the forms of sanctions they encountered, they ranged from 'insistence that correction appears in print' (24% had had this happen 'a few times') to letter of correction / complaint sent to their editor by the source (59% had had this occur at least once). Very few other forms of sanction had been encountered (Tunstall, 1970: 45). Finally, when asking about their demeanour with sources: 64% said they had never shown deference and 85% said they had at some point shown toughness and aggression (Tunstall, 1970: 46). The balance of power from Tunstall's research points clearly towards the journalist. An analysis of where the balance lies now, 35 years on, will, I hope, be of interest to many.

There could also however be many similarities with the way the relationship between political PRs and journalists take place. The arguments put forward by the political economists regarding the source

⁴ Such as continuous marketing, market research and polling, horse race discussions of campaigns. For more see Wernick (1991)

⁵ Jeremy Tunstall pioneered the teaching of media studies at City University in the 1970s. He also held research posts at the University of Essex and the London School of Economics and led the sociology discipline in the early years of the Open University. He has authored ten books (including *The Fishermen* (1962), *Journalists at Work* (1971), *The Media are American* (1997), *The Media in Britain* (1983), *Communications Deregulation* (1986), *Newspaper Power* (1996) and *The Anglo-American Media Connection*, (2001).

of institutionalised bias within the media are as worthy of debate now as they were when they were made by Stuart Hall in the 1970s and Herman and Chomsky in the 1980s. The practitioner viewpoints of the importance of the organisational structures are also equally valid for debate as organisational devices such as news beats still dictate the division of labour within a newsroom. Whilst technology has made an enormous difference to life in the news media (as will be discussed in chapter five) journalists still need a source to provide their stories and political PRs still need someone to receive their information. It is the understanding of how these similarities and differences effect political journalists and PRs that I think will make this research worthwhile.

This thesis is not without retrospective rationale though and again there are three reasons for starting this research journey. The first reason is simply that the political public relations industry is still very young. This immaturity means that there is a deficit of academic research considering the practicalities and implications of gatekeeping in the political news industry. The role of political gatekeepers in the news media is one which appears to have fallen by the wayside of popular academic research in recent years. Whilst political communicators are not a new presence in the UK (Seymore-Ure, 2000: 162), their role and influence has only recently been publicly acknowledged. As a result, academic literature has yet to catch up with the extensive library of popular non-fiction and media articles debating their role and power. This gap between the academic and the popular, highlights a need for empirical research to be conducted into the area of political public relations and its effect on traditional news gatekeeping models. The library of non academic literature, based mainly on autoethnographic (Cockerell et al, 1984, Jones, 1995, 1999, 2003a) or autobiographic (from journalists such as Brunson, 2000, Paxman, 2002 or Parris, 2003 or political PRs such as Ingham, 1991 & 2003) accounts, seems to display either indignation at negative changes to the system or sets out personal manifestos (such as Cockerell et al 1984, Jones, 1999).

These publications, based on personal knowledge and experience, reveal that the field has a lack of arms length research on the relationship between journalists and political PRs. Most of the popular literature is written by those closest to the industry; the journalists or the political PRs themselves. With such an emotive topic and a topic which journalists not only become experts on but are also dealing with on a day-to-day basis, it seems that their views, whilst entirely valid, should be taken with some scepticism when considering the political news industry as a whole. On top of this, much of the published literature on political PRs could be read as a manifesto, designed to right the wrongs their authors perceived were occurring whilst working in the media. Whilst this literature makes many salient points and highlights many of the methods used by political PRs and journalists to 'out-wit' each other, the stance of such views on the relationship between the two cannot be considered to be a true reflection of the overall relationship. Very few authoritative, distanced descriptions of their role,

methods and influence have yet been published and what seems to be needed in this area is a distanced 'arms length' study which is untainted by personal vendettas, years of conflict or personal manifestoes. Documentation profiling a snapshot of the actual system, as it is today, is scarce and something that covers the views of both political PRs and journalists has only, as far as I can see, been studied recently by Gaber (2000 & 2003) and Davis (2002).

The second reason is that, whilst Tunstall's research is one of the best examples of a political journalistic gatekeeping study, it is now over 35 years old, written long before the term 'spin doctor' or 'political PR' came into common usage and before many of the changes in political reporting and the lobby system had come into place. The work, conditions and make up of political correspondents seem to have changed significantly in this time, yet there is little empirical literature to prove this is the case. Whilst a replication of Tunstall's work would then be highly tempting this is, unfortunately, not a viable option. Firstly, because the number of journalists able to work in the lobby has grown so significantly⁶ and secondly, because it is not the pay, conditions and internal relationships I am interested in, it is the external, source relationships I want to investigate. Tunstall studied the people involved in the gathering of news. I wish to study the relationships these people (political journalists) hold with those supplying their content or information (political PRs). These relationships take up only one chapter in Tunstall's book, perhaps due to the fact that the machinery of party and government communications at that time was significantly smaller. It was also far less disposed to focusing on media relations. However, as the growth of source organisations and the number of sources within organisations has grown, the importance of the relationship with political journalists has increased exponentially and it is this relationship the thesis will examine and investigate in detail. On top of this it was written before any of the new media and communications technologies that are common place today were even invented.

Finally, the political source-centred empirical research which does exist looks at the public aspects of political public relations, yet it rarely considers the many specific methods used (the works of Barnett & Gaber, 2001 and Gaber, 2003 are significant exceptions); such as the tactics put in place to keep stories out of the media or to float ideas unofficially. If the news and views we read on a daily basis are not coming from the journalist who has the story by-line but from a hidden political PR, then surely the reader should be educated to understand that there may often be other sources of the information. The source-centred research to date has looked at the activities of press officers placing stories into the media in giving information in order to gain positive coverage. However, much of a

⁶ When Tunstall conducted his study (December 1967) there were 109 members of the Lobby. In 2004 this had increased by 250% with over 280 members⁷ and sending a questionnaire round to all of these, and getting the same level of response (due to increased workloads and stricter copy deadlines) as Tunstall did, would not be realistic.

political PRs work currently involves keeping stories out of the media and minimising negative coverage. Whilst the role of political PRs is discussed regularly in the media, the tactics they use to prevent coverage are mainly unknown to the news media consumer. Only once some of these techniques are publicly identified, can news consumers begin to see with more clarity who it is who is actually providing the news they read.

1.4 The industry under investigation

My research will focus almost entirely on those working in the political news industry. Whilst others on the borders of the politics and news media sectors will certainly have an impact upon this research, the relationship which is of utmost importance to this thesis is that between the two main groups in the political news industry: the political PRs and the political journalists. Whilst the specific make up of the political news industry involves political journalists and political PRs, both groups also sit within bigger, less specialised industries.

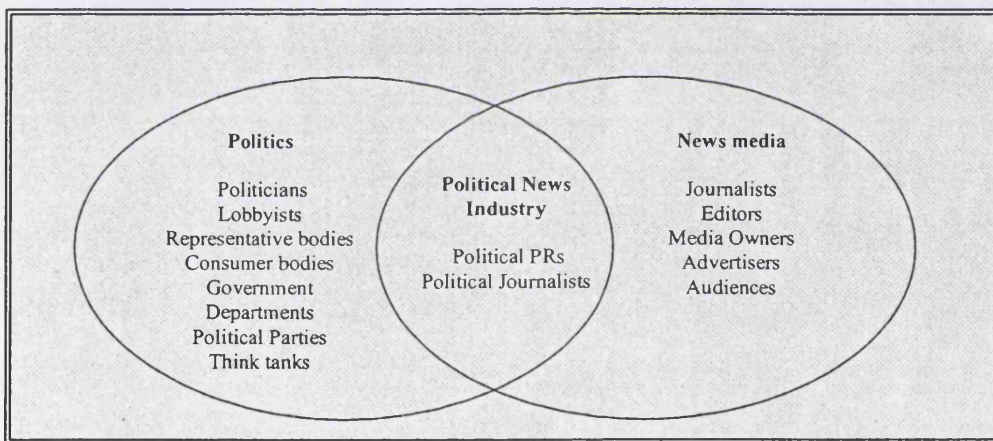


Chart 1a: The make up of the political news industry, J Spiller.

Political journalists in Tunstall's study were Lobby Correspondents however I will not be using this definition. The first reason is that the number of journalists with credentials to enter the lobby has more than doubled since the time of Tunstall's research and the second revolves around the way the lines of division between political and other journalists have blurred considerably. During the 1960s, when Tunstall was researching the Lobby Correspondents, there were three groups of journalists covering politics; (1) the parliamentary sketch writers, (2) those transcribing and summarising debates and (3) those who wrote about government policies, personalities and cabinet decisions; the Lobby Correspondents. Today, no daily newspapers carry Commons Hansard debate transcripts and often political journalists will write lobby stories as well as parliamentary sketches and often cover the

political parties and Whitehall in general. This means that my study will involve political journalists covering any aspect of life within the Westminster Village, including government departments and quangos, the House of Lords, the House of Commons, the Cabinet, the Prime Minister and the political parties.

Political journalists work within a wider 'news media' yet Tunstall's research did not touch on the news media, or even the media in general. He looked very specifically at journalists as a species and journalism as their profession but included very little on the habitat in which they work. The changes that have taken place within the news media in the last thirty years have, it could be argued, had an instrumental effect upon the nature and environment in which journalists work. If the changes have significantly affected not only the ways journalists carry out their work but also how they relate to the other major group in the political news industry (political PRs) then how, or if, they undertake the democratic aspirations of the news media needs to be considered.

There is a huge amount of literature investigating the media, news media and journalists and whilst, in the main, it seems logical to assume that much of the research on 'media' actually means 'news media' it can be unclear as to whether they specifically mean to comment on news or the media. For this reason, my research looks at the 'news media' meaning the publications, channels and programmes which are put together and produced on a regular basis by journalists. Within much of the research I have drawn upon, the two terms are often used interchangeably and where it seems this has happened I will use the theories in relation to the news side of the media. Where researchers discuss the role of the media in a democracy I have taken their ideas with reference to the news media in democracy since almost all of the roles prescribed to the media in democratic literature refer to the news element of its function.

Tunstall's consideration of the interaction of journalists with sources involved sources who were either press officers, with a function to simply provide information, or policy makers, whose interaction with the news media was a tiny part of their job. Those working as political sources now will very often find that their entire remit focuses on the media, both positively interacting with it and proactively defending their organisations from it. These political sources have many names, from the almost universally hated 'spin doctors' to the more politically accepted 'political PR' with many other names in between. For the purposes of this research the term being used is 'political PR' and will include all those working in three sections of the politics industry: (1) special advisors who deal with journalists as part of their job, (2) party communications staff and (3) civil servants working in departmental press offices. They all spend a significant part of their working lives dealing with journalists and will regularly use public relations tactics and procedures.

Political PRs work in a fledgling industry that exists under the larger political umbrella. Political PRs work right across politics, mainly for government departments, political parties and elected politicians but also in any area of interest to political journalists. They will be appointed to manage that interest, protect the department or organisation from negative publicity and to provide as many opportunities for positive publicity as possible. The political public relations industry, whilst still very small, has developed very quickly to match the changes in the news media and those working inside it and now has a multitude of procedures and tactics at their disposal which they use in order to work alongside journalists.

The relationship between the two groups in the political news industry generally focuses on the historical aspirations and expectations which come of working in a representative democracy. Very specific roles can be defined, from both the democratic theory and from more popularist expectations. As a result, UK journalists can find themselves at the centre of discussions regarding the news media's role and political PRs may well find themselves at the centre of heated discussions about their lack of formal role.

1.5 Theoretical issues under consideration

To successfully execute the aims of the research and to answer the specific research questions, the thesis will begin by developing a debate on the theoretical perspectives involved. This will stem from a discussion of the theory of gatekeeping. Using the gatekeeping viewpoint as a starting notion facilitates an analysis of how the industry has been traditionally understood but also provides a way of bringing the political PRs into the mix.

Within the gatekeeping tradition there have been many studies conducted, starting from those in the early 1950s (such as White 1950 and Lewin 1951) working from a very simple, one-dimensional flow through to those who acknowledged many more dimensions in the news flow (see McNelly 1959, Bass 1969 and Chibnall 1977) or more complex dynamics in the news flow (such as Gieber 1956 and Westley and MacLean 1957). These dynamics; including training and socialisation (see Breed 1955 and Harcup 2004), organisational and bureaucratic structures (Sigal 1973, Fishman 1980 and Schlesinger 1987) and the fact that political PRs came on the scene (see Ericson et al 1987, Jones 1999 and Mancini 1999) have all shaped the gatekeeping notion being considered.

The next set of theoretical elements it seems necessary to engage with are those that consider, and aim to elucidate on, the roles of those working in the political news industry. With many perspectives on

the political news media seeming to be based on the notions of control and ownership, views surrounding how the news agenda is controlled and how news content and access is traded and negotiated are numerous. The roles taken by each member of the industry seem to be based on theories focused on the expectations placed upon them, from democratic, political economic and public perspectives. These perspectives instigate expectations which lead to a variety of notions as to why, for whom and for what purpose they are, if they are, aiming to gatekeep.

Working from the perspective that it is valuable for political journalists to provide a free flow of diverse and accurate information, concepts of relevance include Habermas' Public Sphere (1979), Lippman's democratic outlook (1922) and the many views on the filtering of news by journalists (such as those from Glasgow Media Group 1976, Hall 1978 and Herman and Chomsky 2002). Considering the concept that journalists are deemed responsible for providing information to facilitate citizens questioning pre-existing beliefs, we come across Hallin's (1986) concept of the Sphere of Consensus and Bennett's (1989) Indexing Norm which both claim stifle this expectation. We can also consider the role that Hall's (1978) Primary Definers play, the idea of pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1977) and discuss Gandy's (1982) perspective that a reliance on information subsidies is strongly embedded in the news media culture. Looking at the expectation of the news media providing a civic forum encouraging debate, a stronger sense of belonging and encouraging participation in the political process we need to consider the concepts of public journalism (Rosen, 2000) and the public sphere (Habermas, 1979) and the role they aim to play in public life. Finally, looking at the element of the news media providing a check and balance against any abuses of power we need to look at the views put forward by Fjæstad and Holmlöv 1976, Norris 2000 and McQuail 2000.

In considering whose interest political journalists are working we need to regard the concepts of public interest and market interest. O'Neill (1992) works from the perspective that the market can undermine journalism. Against this though there are calls for journalists to remain independent from outside pressures (Gieber, 1964 and Eldridge, 1993).

The professionalism of those working in the political news industry is also an angle which needs conceptualising. McNair (2003) discusses how a greater understanding of the industry can be gained by analysing it from a professional-organisational viewpoint to understand how professional actions impact upon gatekeeping functions. Others have also discussed the 'profession' but through concepts related to routineness (Elliott, 1972), objectivity (Tuchman, 1978), boundaries (Schudson, 1991) and outside influences (Turow 1984, Altschull 1984 and Bagdikian 1997). Cockerell (1984, 2000) has also worked extensively on documenting the professionalisation of the political PR industry.

Finally, the balance between political journalists and their new co-workers: the political PRs, needs to be considered. Some have put forward arguments that the political PRs are now in control of access and content (see for example Jones 1995, Molony 2000 and Barnett and Gaber 2001) whilst others state that journalists are still in firm control of their sources (Alger 1996 and Walker 2002). Between these, Tunstall (1996) provides an Exchange Model to highlight a mutual reliance between the two groups which Gieber and Johnson (1961) claim leads to conspiracy between the two groups but Blumler and Gurevitch (1981) and Hargreaves (2003) argue it is more of a conflictual power struggle between them.

1.6 Realities

The outlook of this thesis is vast. As the theoretical chapter (chapter two) will show, the elements of relevance are many and the perspectives are not only wide ranging but also fall across many academic disciplines. Sections of politics, history, economics, sociology, media and communications, anthropology and ideology all intersect when considering political PRs and political journalists and the way they relate to each other, and relate to the public at large. It is not only an issue of the subject spanning so many areas. It is also an issue of the subject matter taking such depth. The issues surrounding the political news media's place in democracy is important, vital to understand and of great interest to many. It is also however a subject of which many, far longer and more expansive studies than this have only begun to touch on due to its size and importance.

The political news media is also an area which is highly complex and continually moving. With the technological changes which continue to take place, and the increasing levels of globalisation sweeping the industry, simplistic, definitive answers will not be found. I hope my research will amplify these complexities, highlight the many levels and kinds of players who exist in the industry and show where gatekeepers can have an affect. I do not, however, expect to be able to point to one or another industry player (whether journalists or political PRs) and proclaim that they are either the political news gatekeeper or that they hold the balance of power in the industry. The area is too complex and too fast flowing for that. Instead I hope to indicate the direction of the flow of power and, if it is facing the fifth estate, highlight the implications that this could have on the news media as a fourth estate.

1.7 Structure

The political PRs and journalists being studied are based in the UK. To consider their position in relation to each other means we need to first consider the type of debates and arguments which exist to

evaluate the political news media in general (chapter two). This will set out the theoretical issues under investigation including the established, normative and imagined roles of the players involved and the way that power is focused, directed and balanced in the political news industry. This should set out the background against which we are evaluating the activities of political journalists and the effects of their relationship with political PRs in the empirical research.

The historical context in which this thesis should be considered will come next (chapter three). In order to understand the growth, development and intertwining of the two sides of the political news industry there will be a breakdown of the industry from its inception with the development of newspapers in the early 18th century through to the frantically paced multi-media society of 2006.

The methodology to be used in the study will be discussed in chapter four. All options will be considered but, for continuity, I will try to ensure that the methods used by previous researchers in political PR / journalists source relationships are specifically considered. To analyse these relationships I will use previous studies alongside my own research, to consider the position of the news media in today's society and the role of the journalist in the news media (chapter five). It will then be necessary to consider the political PR industry and, within that, the roles and tasks of political PRs (chapter six), before analysing the relationship between the two (chapter seven). Finally, I will consider how this relationship impacts upon not only the effectiveness of journalists in general in executing some of their responsibilities but also specifically their role as a watchdog over the government on behalf of the public (chapter eight). Chapter nine will bring these conclusions together to ascertain the impact of the relationship on the role of the news media in UK democracy.

At the completion of this thesis I aim to have provided an insight into the nature of the relationship between political journalists and political PRs an idea of whether or not this relationship hinders journalists in executing their publicly endorsed expectations and facilitated an in-depth discussion of just who is the political news gatekeeper.

CHAPTER TWO – THEORETICAL BEGINNINGS

“The power to control the flow of information is a major lever in the control of society. Giving citizens a choice in ideas and information is as important as giving them a choice in politics” (Bagdikian, 1983: 226)

The power to decide, dictate or influence news has spawned a whole new industry: the political news industry. This power can be hotly contested by many groups, both inside and outside the official news media. To evaluate and understand it an array of theories have been mooted over the last 50 years, indicating how this industry works and aiming to convey how the groups attempt to control it. The theories range from the macro viewpoint; considering the ownership, societal biases and political economic notions, to those on a more micro level, trying to understand the implications of the day to day sociological elements of the political news industry; the people working inside it and the organisational structures of their news room. Elements of both these standpoints could ideally contribute towards our current understanding of just who makes the news.

Aim: To explore and develop the theories and concepts which can be employed to analyse the relationship between political journalists and political PRs.

The political PR industry has been less theorised than its more established older cousin, the news media, but in considering them together my aim is to make the relationship between them a central focus in this thesis. Due to the fairly new development of political PRs as players in the political news industry it does not seem surprising that they have had less analysis carried out about their role. Despite this, from first impressions, it does seem likely that they could play an important part in the making and presentation of news. As a result I will attempt to consider notions which incorporate the role and position of the political PR or source. This may be difficult however, for, since the first studies on journalism which took place in the 1950s (primarily White, 1950 & Breed, 1955), the majority of studies have tended to look at the decisions taken by journalists or, slightly later on, at the interaction between journalists and their sources. It is reasonable to argue that it is only more recently that there has been substantial research undertaken looking specifically at the activities of government, politicians and their staff as members of a communications industry.

The theoretical underpinning of this thesis, whilst acknowledging the importance of the macro standpoint, will aim to consider the micro viewpoint work as far as possible from a traditional

gatekeeping perspective. This chapter will use the concept of media gatekeeping theory to assess, to the extent that it is feasible to do so within this framework, how the two main players in the political news industry; the political news journalists and the political PRs, fulfil the criteria (most commonly put forward by political theorists) that may be used to legitimise their position in a democratic society. The chapter will initially focus on the development of the theory of gatekeeping; what it is and how and when it works, before attempting to apply it in a consideration of which characters and groups are involved in the process. It will then be feasible to explore some of the factors that give rise to the players' legitimisation, licence to practice and inspiration. A consideration and defence of those critiques with regards to the notion of the centrality of gatekeeping in the political news media will conclude the chapter.

2.1 The development of the concept of gatekeeping

At its most basic, gatekeeping could be described as "the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day" (Shoemaker, 1991: 1). It may also be considered to be a process of placing news media in media channels. On a wider basis however it can be extended to encompass more than just the message but each and every aspect of message selection, handling and control and choice of channels used (Donohue, Tichenor and Olien, 1972). The relative power needed to control this process, and to 'keep' the 'gates' may then be thought to be an influential and envied position to have. As a result, perhaps, of the interest in this contested position, and the potential power it holds, a number of gatekeeping studies (some of the main ones being Sigal, 1973, Epstein, 1973, Tuchman, 1978, Gans 1980, Shoemaker, 1991)¹ have been undertaken in the last 60 years.

Gatekeeping looks to have been developed as an academic concept in 1947. The first placement appears to be a paper by Lewin (1951) which considered group dynamics and the processes and channels used to get food onto the table of a household. This was developed by White² into a theory more centrally located in the communication field when he researched the processes used to select and reject news stories on a small town newspaper in Iowa. He tracked the selection decisions against the personal preferences of the wire-editor ('Mr Gates') and noted down his reasonings for selection or rejection. From this research, White concluded that often the decisions taken to include stories were highly subjective (White, 1950: 386) and depended strongly on who it was that was overseeing the

¹ Schudson (1989: 263-270) covers the history of the gatekeeping tradition

² An early study into this relationship was White's 1950s research which analysed the role of the sub-editor. For one week in 1949, the wire copy rejected by a newspaper sub-editor, 'Mr Gates' was saved, with his reasons for rejection noted. The results were analysed and patterns found. It was discovered that his copy showed a disproportionate amount of human-interest stories (something he admitted he preferred), conservative stories (which he had also admitted he had a preference for) and a lack of stories on the catholic religion (which matched his dislike of the religion). Whilst there are problems with White's study² it did begin to focus minds on the importance of source/journalist relationships and indicate that personal relationships were of great importance (White, 1950).

entry gates to the newsroom. McQuail and Windahl (1981; 100) captured White's model to provide a basic, but considered, summary of his notion:

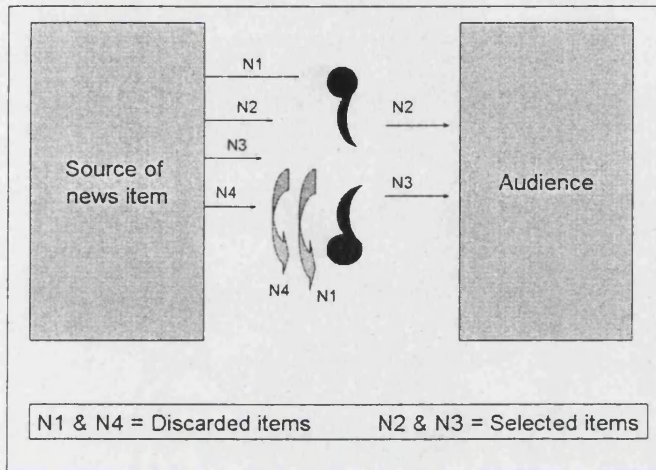


Chart 2a: White's version of gatekeeping: from McQuail & Windall, 1981: 100

The picturised form of White's model (above) highlights the simplicity of his perspective on the flows and elements involved in news production. It also shows a polarised flow (from one way to the other without any feedback) with a separation from, and lack of acceptance of, other gatekeepers. It is two dimensional and flows only one way. Whilst the central tenant of the theory of gatekeeping seems to have remained the same since this simplistic, flat model, it can be argued that the overarching notion has moved on and developed dramatically as researchers began to consider the dimensions of the news flow, and the dynamics of those involved.

A final issue to be considered on the development of gatekeeping is the background context to the theory. Based on a sender-receiver model (see Shannon & Weaver, 1949) the idea is very straightforward, looking at 'who says what - to whom - with what effect'. This notion could be seen as simplistic yet outdated in a society where multiple inputs can interfere with the pureness of the flow. It could be argued that a circular society thwarts this sender-receiver notion entirely as separating the sender from the receiver becomes very difficult when at times the complexity sees the sender become the receiver and vice versa. Not only this, individualised communication techniques, such as multi-channel television, sophisticated recording devices, the internet and downloads, all mean that the timing of delivery models becomes an increasingly personal choice. As a result a consideration of how far these dimensions and dynamics have extended from the more simplistic models first put forward in the 1950s looks to be necessary so we can see how well a gatekeeping theory can explain the complexities of today's political news media.

2.1.1 Dimensions of the news flow

In a political context, White's model may be interpreted as being one which describes a process of information being given by politicians to a single journalist who would make the decision as to whether that information should become a story. The journalist would have more than one element on which to base his or her decision (the space available, the frequency of other similar stories, the personal preferences of that journalist towards the viewpoint being given or the knowledge of the journalist as to what the editor is looking for) but this model indicates a decision would be taken by one person in one process.

McNelly, (1959: 25) added a dimension into White's theory, suggesting that many gatekeepers were involved in the process. His view still saw them working in a liner fashion however, with a piece of information entering a newsroom and flowing through many journalists one by one, like an editorial obstacle course. He illustrated his view using a foreign news example, discussing how any piece of information must go through foreign correspondents, editors, re-writemen, desk editors, and news editors before it can be published (McNelly, 1959: 23).

Bass (1969) seemed to work from a liner lineage too but his work differentiated the types of gatekeepers for the first time, splitting them into two groups: news gatherers and news processors. Whilst this is still simplistic (and could be said to ignore the roles of non-journalists in the process) it does acknowledge that not all gatekeepers provide the same functions and that different types of gatekeeping decisions will be made; some on content, some on the amount of time given to a story, some on where a story is to be placed within a broadcast or in a newspaper.

Chibnall (1977) pulled the main thrust of the flow back down to the journalist on the street, arguing that by the time a news story got to an editor the important decisions had already been made. He said that the journalist constructs news from variously scattered fragments and that this raw material is composed by the journalist into a story. Once this story gets to the editor, there are only a few tweaks on placement or space given to the story they can make. Chibnall can also be given credit for introducing the idea of the source being integral to the flow of news. Gandy (1982) extended this understanding pointing out that it is exactly a political PRs job to provide information subsidies to journalists, filling any gaps in coverage with perfectly compatible, easy to use stories.

The information subsidy viewpoint introduces the strong involvement of other players into the gatekeeping process but, it could be said that, Gandy was still proposing a single dimension with

information flowing from the PR to the journalist. A further development can be suggested however as researchers began to consider the political news media from a wider dimension, with journalists feeding their views back into politicians. In this instance, what seems to be lacking is a debate over the flow of news, and how journalists have come full circle in their place, back and forth – ensuring the gates swing both ways, letting some news stories through – but also contributing to the debate themselves, putting stories back out.

2.1.2 The dynamics of the news flow

Alongside the change in dimensions in the news flow there also seem to have been advances in how the dynamics have been considered. Rather than it simply being a case of a journalist choosing which pieces of news to publish, some of the available studies can also be interpreted as showing there are further dynamics; such as other journalists, other groups and outsiders getting involved.

Gieber (1956) used his research to consider factors on gatekeeping beyond the personal. He worked with 16 different newspaper editors and concluded that personal subjectivity was actually less invasive than had been thought and that the pressures of time and space were actually more prevalent in decision making. At the same time, others (such as Westley and MacLean, 1957) began to consider that the organisational elements of news gathering were having a significant impact upon how news was portrayed and covered. They argued that although it was still only one element making decisions on what would be news, it was a multi-headed element. The argument followed that the ‘organisation’ was making decisions, firstly on the basis of simple logistics, how the organisation worked to cover the news and secondly on the basis of attitude, the organisation taking on its own perspective and covering information through a specified filter – a filter that all its journalists knew to follow.

A major UK study in the political news arena, Tunstall’s 1970 investigation of the role of the political lobby correspondents, looked into the backgrounds, training and socialisation of the political journalist at Westminster in an attempt to understand how they worked and how political news was made. Others have continued this type of research³, extending their investigations to consider how organisational and bureaucratic structures have influenced the working lives of those in the political news industry. They have also incorporated examinations of how journalists balance their professional “values alongside a variety of external and internal pressures and logistical constraints; all shaping the character of the news which emerges” (Harrison, 2006: 129). In this light, the dynamics of the news

³ See the following observational studies of news organisations: Epstein (1973), Cohen and Young (1973), Tracey (1978), Curran and Gurevitch (1991), Chibnall (1977), Schlesinger (1978), Tuchman (1978), Gans (1980), Golding & Elliott (1979), Fishman (1980), Ericson et al (1990), Cottle (1993) and Harrison (2000).

flow appear to have a concerted impact upon a political PR's or a journalist's ability to gatekeep. These impacts could range from the ways in which journalists are trained and integrated within their various organisations through to the practicalities of collecting news stories and the professional norms and bureaucracies with which the political news industry works. My ambition here will be an attempt to examine these elements in order to try to suggest a way of understanding how the dynamics work.

2.1.2.1 Training and Socialisation

Harrison concluded from her research that journalism education is based on a belief that reporting is a skill to be learned through experience and practice and that learning occurs through doing (Harrison, 2006: 18). This view could be seen as reinforcing the idea of journalists as gatekeepers, creating barriers through their expertise of what should, or should not, be considered news. Empirically, this could be thought of as being reflected in the remarkably applied nature of journalism courses in the UK. Whilst skills such as shorthand, structuring a report and legalities are taught on courses, most new journalists enter the industry through work experience or apprenticeships. This emphasis could be evidenced by practitioners stating that journalism doesn't have "an accepted career structure, necessary entry requirements or an effective system of self-policing" (Marr, 2004: 3) and the main skills are those learnt on the job. These skills, such as understanding what will be considered a good story, which contacts to use on each beat and what the editor will give space to, come, many think (including Galtung & Ruge, 1965 and Harcup & O'Neill, 2001), through the news room socialisation process. This process in each newsroom could be seen as highlighting to each journalist the organisation's news values. The argument follows that every news process a journalist learns in training will, in reality, become another new gatekeeping process for them. The same, it could be suggested, is true of socialisation.

The news values of each news organisation, whilst often very similar, can be seen to vary and the argument states that it is only through socialisation that a trainee or newly employed journalist will learn them. It has been suggested that they either learn the values through a process of osmosis (gradually understanding why some of their stories are printed when others are not) or through more direct means when they are told what to include and from which angle to write it. In 1965, Galtung and Ruge listed the elements of a story which they felt gave it its news values, the more elements present – they said, the higher up the news agenda it would go (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Many of these are still relevant today as highlighted in Harcup and O'Neill's (2001: 261-280) update. Harcup and O'Neill concluded that whilst many of the elements that 'make' a story can be taught, many "recruits to journalism tend to pick up a sense of newsworthiness and develop their nose for a story by

consuming news and by absorbing news values from senior colleagues" (Harcup, 2004: 34). This is newsroom socialisation. One negative outcome of this viewpoint however may be that information or a story which does not fit the news values of a particular organisation may be dropped from the news agenda or buried in the back of a publication. This view was followed in Breed's (1955) research which concluded that once the newsroom's policy was set, socialisation ensured the journalists followed it. He concluded that journalists' actions were by and large motivated by their search for a conflict-free environment and their need for reference group formation.

For the purposes of this thesis, we need to focus specifically on those journalists working in the Westminster Village, as the area and institutions around Parliament have become known. When looking at political journalism, the training and socialisation can be particularly essential as the history, traditions and processes⁴ could come across as complex and (as Cockerell and Barnett & Gaber describe) can also take place behind closed doors. It can be a slow process of socialisation however as new recruits learn the secret languages and codes to describe sources and private briefings to favoured journalists. The Lobby, the collective name of the political correspondents, have privileged access, both to areas of the Commons and to briefings and information (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 38-42). Although Lobby members may be fed information from press officers, communications directors and ministerial special advisors, they can also be fighting with them to get information, favours and the upper hand. This potentially means they do not only have to learn how to outwit these groups but also how to use them for their own needs. In this way the lobby could be perceived as a physical gate through which information must come to be taken seriously as a political news story.

Taking on the points made about the importance of socialisation for journalists, it must then be considered if political PRs should be, or are, 'socialised' too. The argument can be made that political PRs, trying to influence political journalists, need to be savvy and highly knowledgeable about the processes used by journalists and news media in order to understand how to get their information through Westminster's 'news gates'. They need to learn how Westminster works and how the news values in each organisation are applied. A political PRs success appears to be based upon making sure their information is as newsworthy as possible. Only once their story 'ticks every box,' the socialisation theory would contend, will they be able to get coverage in the news media. In this view, their ability to learn this, learn the news values applied by those journalists and to interact with journalists in a meaningful way is the making, or breaking, of each of their careers. Using the empirical example of organisations employing ex-journalists as political PRs we can begin to see how parties or government departments are fully encompassing the idea of socialisation. The new political PRs (the ex-journalists) understand what messages the journalists are looking for, and in what form it

⁴ For more see Cockerell et al (1984) Tunstall (1970 and 1971) and Barnett and Gaber (2001)

makes it easiest for journalists to receive them. This 'socialisation' could then be said to ensure political PRs follow the news values of the relevant news organisation and write in a way that is appealing for journalists (Harrison, 2006: 112). In short, the traditional journalist gatekeepers could be considered to have become the poachers.

A potential problem arises however in this case if older journalists retire and leave the news room, to become political PRs. The younger recruits can be less aware of the power and techniques used by political PRs meaning "the balance of power and influence is being tilted away from the journalist" (Harrison, 2006: 113) with an implication being that the PRs are manning the gates. The argument says that the stronger the ability of the political PR to know exactly what will be accepted by a journalist (and hopefully for the PR placed in the news media verbatim), the weaker the ability of the journalist to close the gates against that PR or their information.

Those concerned about a lack of diversity and plurality in the news media may present a cause for concern with respect to the socialisation aspect of gatekeepers. This could focus the potential for socialisation to occur within the political news media as a whole and not just within a news organisation. This approach might then see journalists as learning to mirror each other, sticking with what is familiar and safe. It could instigate a strong dependency on pack journalism with a fear being that many news channels would publish very similar stories, in a very similar way, backing up each other to the detriment of their audience's knowledge. This argument follows through to news conglomerates too, saying the socialisation processes, whilst allowing each publication or channel to have its own personality, could be led by a publisher, the implication being all channels in the portfolio could broadcast a similar attitude, stifling pluralism.

2.1.2.2 Organisational and bureaucratic structures

A group of researchers focusing on the sociology of the news media have concluded that the political news industry depends so heavily on the organisational and bureaucratic structure, that the world could be seen as "bureaucratically organised for journalists" (Fishman, 1980: 51) with "newsmen, like most of the people they cover" being "organisation men" (Sigal, 1973: 3). An ethnographic study into a BBC newsroom by Schlesinger found this to be in evidence and he analysed case studies of news selection decisions to consider each of the organisational mechanisms used to control the product of the newsroom. He concluded that bureaucratic systems within the news room, such as the daily news meeting and the editorial structure may be seen as systems of restraint. He said: "it's surprising to find there's a grand design. The news we receive on any given day is not as unpredictable as much journalistic mythology would have us believe. Rather, the doings of the world are tamed to meet the

needs of a production system in many respects bureaucratically organised" (Schlesinger, 1987: 47). Other studies have backed up this view and some have highlighted the techniques used by reporters which they claim illustrates that news gathering is often simply a case of one institution feeding another. One such study comes from Epstein who, in his study of journalists, *News From Nowhere* (1973), used organisational theory to highlight the constraints that impacted upon the making of news. He argued that most of what we regard as news is derived from the bureaucratic tensions which are involved in producing news. He claimed that news values are simply an acceptance of what can be accomplished through organizational routines. These news values then act as the gatekeeper. Sigal's study of reporters and government officials also followed this view, finding that as journalists cannot logistically witness every event directly, they "must locate themselves in places where information is most likely to flow to them" (Sigal, 1973: 119). Efficiency, he then looks to be claiming, dictates that newsgathering must occur through routine channels and, once a journalist has identified the channels through which the news will flow they rely heavily on those channels. This backs up Chibnall's views that it is the journalist on the ground who is the key gatekeeper.

At this point it is helpful to interject a question. Is it the journalist as a person, or the journalist as an agent of his or her publication, who these researchers are claiming is the gatekeeper? This is relevant as it appears that often the same organizations and sources will be used time and again by journalists. A reliance on only a few sources in this way has been labelled a 'beat' and been described as following a prescribed set of institutions and sources. Fishman's research claimed that the reliance of a beat results in only official business and official information getting reported (Fishman, 1980: 33) and that even when a journalist has moved on, the beat, and the bureaucracies and contacts within it, stay the same and are used by the new beat reporter. This could cause 'beat biases', especially where there could be seen to be a focused concentration of a relatively small number of inter-connected individuals whose views are used to validate the news (Reese et al, 1994). This idea of the beat claims that it is not the journalist per se who is the gatekeeper, but the bureaucratic system as a whole which takes a strong position in acting as the gatekeeper.

Another organisational structure which it has been suggested as impacting upon the validity of news gathering processes acting as a gatekeeping facility is Tuchman's 'news net.' She uses this theory to argue that the news media are designed to catch news like fish with the amount caught dependent on the strength and fineness of the net. She highlights that the nearer a news event is to the audience, the greater the chance of coverage, indicating that location could provide a hierarchy of news (Tuchman, 1978). This was something echoed by Elliot's (1972) research which studied the making of a documentary on racial prejudice and concluded that there was a high dependency on 'contact chains,' where journalists used their personal contacts to find source material. The dependency meant that the

resulting content reflected not only a very narrow perspective but also one that echoed the production teams' views. These studies interlink to argue that these organisational and bureaucratic processes act as gates in the editorial journey. It is not just journalists however who have an impact on how a news story is found, followed through and published. A new group, to be known here as political PR, have joined the political news industry and made themselves feel very much at home.

2.1.2.3 Political PRs join the party

Studies from the late 1980's onwards have suggested that the organisational and bureaucratic structures have begun to incorporate more outsiders into the process of news gathering. The implication is that the external environment in which news organisations operate has gained importance with those coming from the external environment aiming to impact strongly upon the gatekeeping process. Some suggest they aim to take over the process completely. They state that there could be elements from outside the news organisation which effect the news content produced. One of the main effects could be an increase in the level of influence held by news sources. Ericson highlights this saying "journalists face the bounds of powerful sources who mobilize strategically to variously avoid and make news. While the news-media institution is effectively closed to most citizens...a limited range of sources can pry it open and sometimes harness its power to advantage" (Ericson et al, 1987: 364).

In this situation, news could be shaped by those who know how to feed the news media. This may mean that some sources are given priority above others because they are better at getting access to journalists.⁵ Those that are able to exploit technology would also do very well⁶ as they would be able to provide a "constant diet of fresh stories ... in order to feed the 24-hour news cycle" (Jones, 1999: 2). The political parties would also be able to work out how to utilise the news media's bureaucratic tendencies. Some political commentators (Jones for example), claim this has happened, and others (such as Gould) defend it saying that because the parties "are under 24-hour media attack, it is common sense to employ people to put the view of the party or organisation" (Gould, 1998: 334). An upshot of the 24-hour news world can be seen as a news media with less room and even less time for gatekeeping to take place inside the news organisation. This could indicate that the gap could be filled from outside the organisation. Jones backs this view saying that the changes have worked to the advantage of those groups who are involved in this dispersed news media environment, allowing them to influence the news agenda and implying that political PRs are potentially able to gatekeep. Mancini agrees, but links this (in the political world) directly to political PRs, saying that changes in

⁵ For more on this see: Altheide 1985, Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994, Ericson et al 1989, Cook 1989, Schlesinger 1990, Anderson 1991, 1997, Deacon & Golding 1994, Miller 1994, Manning 1998 & 2001, Davies 2000 and Harrison 2006.

⁶ See chapter five for more on 'news on demand,' the increased appetite for 'rolling news,'

telecommunications have mixed with social change to ensure the growth of political public relations and have “fundamentally altered the character of political parties and government” (Mancini, 1999: 231). These changes, they claim, create an industry of outsiders and insiders (with insiders regularly being located outside the formal news media), allowing outsiders to become stigmatised (Goffman, 1963).

Those who have investigated how material is placed with journalists have concluded that the successful, insider sources will get content to journalists through a wide variety of methods. Harcup (2004: 46) and Jones (2001: 140-181) include press releases, news agency copy, from reporters, other news channels (TV, radio, newspapers, internet) and phone calls from sources. They also detail how political journalists specifically will receive leaks, early copies of speeches, exclusive interviews and embargoed reports. It is thus suggested that knowing how to work (and manipulate) the organisational and bureaucratic structures of the political news media could become a key strength for those not inside the news media but who wish to influence it.

Whilst few seem to deny that there is an increased presence of outsiders inside political journalism, some researchers would be keen to highlight that there are many more influences than just political PRs. They point to the growth in technology, specific structures of ownership and control and the extent to which the broader ideological climate have the ability to shape the thinking of all in the industry. Elements surrounding the position of audiences, markets and advertisers have also gained salience (Shoemaker, 1991: 60-67) and the ideological model, looking from the top down, and from the outside in, seeing news organised to be part of the “flow of information organised within the dominant framework” (Glasgow Media Group, 1976: 5) has been widely discussed. This view could imply that a bureaucratic presence puts a news filter in place. Herman and Chomsky clarify this further with their propaganda model which “traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 2). They highlight five filters⁷ through which they believe all information must pass in order to prevent information which is unsympathetic to those dominant in society being considered newsworthy and published. This model implies that the values projected by the news media, caught through established organisational practices, are likely to be very similar to the values held by those considered elite in a bureaucratic society, usually those in government.

⁷ The five filters used as control mechanisms are: the size of the media firms, the role of advertising, the reliance of the media on PR, the use of flak to discipline the media and anti-communism.

2.2 Unpacking and redefining the roles of the political news players

As we have seen above, research has been conducted to establish the impact of the groups on the borders of the political news industry on how news is created, gathered, shaped and disseminated. The indication appears to be however that it is the political journalists and PRs who are the key players. This would mean that a study of their relationship with each other is critical. The implication is that the way they play their societal roles, through the news media, could have a significant impact on the control, knowledge and inspiration of citizens. If this is the case, then research into their roles would be a key tactic in understanding whose news it really is. In this light, we can consider how many theories about the way the news media work, from those with a political economic stance, to the more sociological at heart, involve disseminating and analysing how those carrying out journalism, and those interesting in influencing what those journalists publish, conduct their roles. Whether they come from a high level, macro perspective or a bottom up viewpoint, focusing on the practicalities of collecting and disseminating news it could be said they are concerned about how these roles are carried out.

Many perspectives on the political news media seem to be based on the notions of control and ownership, specifically, how the news agenda is controlled and how news content and access is traded and negotiated. An argument could be put forward that says that control and ownership of the agenda allows those with the power, the ability to dictate what makes it into the news media and the manner in which it is discussed. It could be suggested that control and ownership of the content provides sources with the tools to leverage space and coverage, and the journalist (in having control of the space and the facilities to provide coverage) has the tools to leverage content. The ability to get access could mean, for sources, the ability to get their content and information onto news media dissemination channels. For journalists, the ability to get information from those who often refuse to speak directly to the news media would be equally useful. These areas could have a strong impact on the way the news media is run and how it is influenced. This makes it important to consider the democratic, assumed and perceived functions that journalists and political PRs undertake when working within the political news industry. It also seems important to attempt to understand why each group wants to gatekeep. Where do they envisage their power and control comes from? How do they interpret their roles to facilitate a desire to posture and muscle flex over a range of information? What is their mode de operandi? Where does their power, their justification, their legitimisation, their licence to operate come from? What drives the political journalist, and their PR counterpart, to do what they do?

In response to these questions there are three areas by which it might be argued that political news players derive the impetus to act as a gatekeeper. Firstly, by fulfilling expectations placed upon them by the democratic foundations of the country in which they work and the members of the society in which they live. Secondly, they could claim they are working in someone else's interest. Finally, to understand their motives, the professionalism of both journalists and political PRs needs to be taken into account. We will consider each element here.

2.2.1 Expectations

Ideally speaking, the political journalist has, in their daily work, an array of expectations which could be placed upon them. There may well be very similar to those that could be placed on citizens in any democratic societies which involve obligations and freedoms. They seem to come from three separate angles, (a) the expectations they are trying to act as an integral element of a representative democratic society, (b) trying to fulfil the job description given to them by other members of their profession and (c) trying to work within the political economy of the country or societal system in which they are based to respond to basic social norms and could place upon them a variety of reasons as to why, for whom and for what purpose they are gatekeeping.

The two sides of the political news industry (politicians / political PRs and the news media / political journalists) appear to acquire much of their status from their relationships (both formal and informal) with the public. In the UK's representative democracy, politicians are elected to parliament at least every five years. They are elected by the public, to represent the public. This election process could be seen as inspiring specific expectations on the part of society generally, and the public specifically, of what they want to see their political representatives (and their staff) do and how they expect them to act. Journalists also take on a relationship with the public – not simply as an entertainment service with the public acting an audience - but also as a defender of the public, informer to the public and the facilitator of public debate. These potential expectations need to be discussed here to understand the processes against which the news media are judged.

To consider the democratic expectations of the news media we need go back to the foundations of today's representational government. Whilst this spans many hundreds of years, the basics could be seen as being laid down more formally by John Locke in the 17th century. His view was that political power was held on 'trust' by, and for, the people, and that in order to ensure this, some system of separating political powers should be established (Held, 1996: 78-82). This theory was developed into one of protective democracy where Utilitarians, such as Bentham and James Mill, declared "since those who govern will naturally act in the same way as the governed, government must, if its

systematic abuse is to be avoided, be directly accountable to an electorate" (Held, 1996: 95). Whilst this refers to the importance of regular elections it could also be seen as highlighting that it is essential that the activities of those in positions of power should be scrutinized routinely to ensure that not only is the use of power undertaken responsibly but that it is used in the interests of the community as a whole (Windlesham, 1966: 230).

JS Mill developed this idea of scrutinitization into a theory of representative democracy conceiving of a political life with a more continuously accountable government. This theory, it could be argued, has grown into the idea of a fully representative democratic system where, along with freedom of speech and the press, central powers can be watched and debate and competition thrives for the benefit of all. It could be claimed this system of allowing politicians to make decisions on behalf of voters is answerable through elections at specified periods and that this answerably means people will be adequately represented. The argument implies that that whilst it would be difficult, neigh impossible, for everyone to get all of their views represented all of the time, it should create a situation of general and overall consent where decisions reflect the will of the majority. Whether this occurs in reality is highly debatable but, within this system, each institution of governance has been allocated specific roles and responsibilities, and the news media is no exception. This system of representative democracy (which can be said to be in place in the UK) is designed to make government accountable to its citizens and to create wiser citizens capable of pursuing the public interest (Held, 1996: 115). Altschull sums up these links neatly:

"In a democracy, it is the people who rule. The voice of the people is heard in the voting booth. The decisions made by people in the voting booths are based on the information made available to them. That information is provided primarily by the news media. Hence the news media are indispensable to the survival of democracy."

(Altschull, 1984: 19)

Within the structure of a representative democracy, it is argued that the news media have some very specific roles and responsibilities. There is some debate however over quite what the roles, responsibilities and expectations are.⁸ Zaller calls his interpretation the 'Full News Standard'. He says the Standard is only reached when the news media fulfil those responsibilities which provide citizens with the basic information necessary for them to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day (Zaller, 2003: 110). The responsibilities include aspirations that they act: as a civic forum encouraging pluralistic debate (including providing information to inform those debates); as a

⁸ Full discussions on the importance of democracy in the news media can be found in Scammell & Semetko (2000: xx-xiv), Sparks (1988: 209-223) or Hallin & Mancini (2004)

mobilising agent encouraging participation in the political process and as a check and balance against any abuses of power (Norris, 2000: 22-25). It seems then fulfilling the Standard would confer explicit expectations on the part of journalists working in the news media to act in a certain manner and, as such, imply certain aspirations upon the media by citizens in the democracy.

A further definition of the roles, responsibilities and expectations could be considered to be common sense views which set out the perspectives held by consumers as a result of cumulative exposure to the news media. The argument says they are not views grounded in empirical evidence or theory, more those which have arisen out of focus groups, audience surveys and questionnaires. It is these views which can contribute towards the oft stated perception that there was once a 'golden era' of news which is now in decline. Some, such as Harrison, have implied that these type of viewpoints are often used by news organisations to defend following an audience (rather than journalist or events) led news agenda. It is then argued that following an audience led agenda allows, and even invites, accusations of dumbing down and falling standards (Harrison, 2006: 17-18).

The common sense views could be envisaged as providing general ideals which 'the public' believe should be present in the news media to ensure it facilitates how they think democracy should work. The basis for these ideals seems to be that whilst the 'public' want to see freedom of expression they realise this must be tempered with some sensible restrictions (Mill, 1859). McQuail (2000) highlights these in a list of aspirations which include free flowing, easily obtainable, accurate, reliable and diverse information, which can be used to (a) challenge existing political, social, economic and cultural truths and (b) to improve citizens knowledge and understanding. Harrison has labelled these requirements the 'Ideal News Economy' (Harrison, 2006: 101).

One overarching expectation which could come across from both angles is that the news media should act as an integral element of the political system. In this way it could be that the news media not only acts as a check and balance on the other political estates but also shows them as an integral, interlocking, element of the political world, feeding political information to the public, helping them question pre-existing beliefs, facilitating personal involvements in the political process, advising the other political estates on the 'public opinion' of the day. It is with this in mind, taking into account both the Full News Standard and the Ideal News Economy, that I feel it is important to next consider what could be thought to be the key expectations of the news media:

- A free flow of diverse and accurate information
- Information to facilitate citizens questioning pre-existing beliefs
- A civic forum encouraging debate, a stronger sense of belonging and encouraging participation in the political process

- A check and balance against any abuses of power

Discussing each of these elements individually and in greater detail may help to allow a deeper understanding of the aspirations and expectations that the public, as both citizens and consumers, hold. Whilst the expectations discussed here will be idealistic, they should highlight some of the standards by which the news media could believe they are held to some level of account by the public. They should also provide some insight as to how researchers have so far seen political PRs get involved in the gatekeeping process.

2.2.1.1 Free flow of diverse and accurate information

The news media has been said to make a contribution towards an effective democracy by providing citizens with the “information which they need to function as political citizens” (Sparks, 1988: 211). If our knowledge of the world beyond our everyday experience is structured by the symbols, values and selective criteria of others (Lippmann, 1922) then it could be seen as the news media’s responsibility to provide as much information as possible. This information would be essential to accommodate the Habermasian ideal of a news media who provide a public space with access to be “guaranteed to all citizens” (Habermas, 1979: 198).

The view from this perspective gives the impression that the news media provide a platform from which to present information and ideas, acting as an informed partner in conversation facilitating in a quasi-interactive way (McQuail, 2000: 159-160). In functioning almost as an interpreter, analysing and interpreting complex questions (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986), free flow information provision would allow the news media to be an educator and facilitator feeding the public social and political information (Fjaestad & Holmlov, 1976: 108-114). The free flow of information can be seen in more than one way however, as either an open window or as a mirror.

If the free flow of information takes the form of an open window, it could allow the public to see what might usually be closed off or unavailable in their geographical locality. Whilst this could be a highly desirable option, to be achieved fully it would require uniform freedom of information in every walk of life, bureaucracy and sector of government. As those working from a practitioner viewpoint would emphatically state, journalists are rarely fortunate to have enough reliable and accurate information flowing directly to them to make this a reality. It seems more likely that information must be gathered; sought out, planted or caught in a ‘news net’ (Tuchman, 1978), watched vociferously on a beat (Fishman, 1980) or planned meticulously as a media event (Boorstin, 1977, Lawrence 2000). The argument would suggest that these news gathering activities could impact negatively upon the purity

of the information gathered. A public digesting the news media, assuming that they are receiving truly pure information, could then be misguided and placed at an intellectual disadvantage. Instead, maybe the free flow of information could be more accurately described as a mirror enabling the public to see what is going on without outside interference giving a faithful reflection (McQuail, 2000: 159-160)?

The image of a mirror is critiqued by those arguing that journalists aiming to offer a truly free flowing, accurate and diverse information service will always struggle. Much as they might aspire to offer the public a mirror on the world, giving a faithful reflection the argument says that this is not possible if the angle of the mirror is even slightly tilted or if there is any distortion in the surface (McQuail, 2000: 159-160). Political economists argue that rather than the viewers seeing the world at face value, the mirror would actually be a filtered viewpoint where only selected ideas were let through. They suggest this filtering occurs because a ruling capitalist class dictates to editors and reporters what to run in their newspapers (Garnham, 1979). They view news organisations simply as conduits with which to maintain the economic system, and news as a tool shaped to protect the status quo (Golding and Murdock 1991; Curran, Douglas, and Whannel 1981, Gandy 1982). This is backed by the work of Herman and Chomsky (see page 27) which states that, in capitalist nations, the news media serves the established and recognized powers.

The ruling power could be seen by the political economists as being able to, through the news media, define normality and set agendas. News would then not be, as the common sense expectations would suggest, the 'events in the world' but a "manifestation of the collective cultural codes of those employed to do this selective and judgmental work for society" (Glasgow University Media Group 1976: 14). Hall (1982) followed this view through to analyse the impact of journalists signifying events in a particular way and concluded that there was a 'reality effect' where ideology appeared natural and imposed an "imaginary coherence on the units being represented" (Hall, 1982). Backing up this view comes the work of the Glasgow University Media Group who used organisational theory, ideological critique and language studies to analyse television coverage of industrial relations. They argued that the news stories they investigated carried many culturally dominant assumptions with, in this case, the worker's point of view being seen as less credible than that of management (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980, 1986; Philo 1990, Eldridge 1993). Robert McChesney (1997, 1999) also came to a similar conclusion saying that journalism's dependence on corporate structures means they do not "give people what they wanted" and fail as a public service.

If, as these political economists claim, those in the news media (be it advertisers, journalists, owners or sources) were able to influence select parts of this information for special attention and close off other views and voices (Janowitz, 2000: 618) then it could be said that journalism is neither adding to

collective knowledge nor providing a free flow of accurate or diverse information. It would simply be reflecting already ingrained biases within society.

A further critique of both the window and mirror imagery is applied by Molotch and Lester, coming from the practitioner viewpoint. It appears they see that a true free flow of information as impossible as there are simply not enough journalists in place to catch and disseminate it. In *News as Purposive Behavior* (1974) they use what Schudson terms the 'sociological organization of newswork' (Schudson, 1991), to claim that news production was the result of purposive behaviour with journalists working according to an index of news stories by which they could organize their coverage of news events. Instead of the news media reflecting a world 'out there' it is argued they are simply reflecting the practices used by those with the power to determine the experience of others. A limited number of journalists must, it is said, utilise their information collection practices to the best of their ability to gather news as effectively and efficiently as possible. This implies however that not every piece of newsworthy information will be able to be collected and so a genuine free flow of news stories is unlikely to be possible.

A further problem arises when we consider the terms themselves. If there is an argument that the public need to be able to trust journalists to make a judgment call on whether a piece of information is reliable or accurate, the public need to understand what can be classed as reliable and accurate. Both terms however are fluid and lacking in clarity. Instead the concept of social responsibility could be considered in order to tighten up these aspirations and provide more specific requirements. The phrase 'social responsibility', coined during the 1947 Commission on Freedom of the Press, was a response to the question: 'what key journalistic standards should the press should seek to maintain?' The agreed response incorporated an obligation on the part of the news media to accept that they have a public duty to provide information which is truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant (Hutchins, 1947). The value could thus place on the journalist a responsibility to follow a prescribed code of ethics, ensure (to the best of their ability) that their work is truthful, fair and objective and to express the needs of society in a direct way. This again could raise problems however as, once again, the incorporation of words such as truthful, fair and objective could be used differently.

Providing information to challenge political, social, economic and cultural truths can be achieved, as has been touched on above, through ensuring pluralism of information and views within the news media, or within each dissemination channel. A further way of achieving this though could be to provide the public with more pointed and opinionated information to help them decide if those in charge of political, social, cultural and economic society are acting in their interests.

2.2.1.2 Information to facilitate citizens questioning pre-existing beliefs

Without a strong pluralism in the news media it could be argued that there will not be a wide enough range of views from which the public can use to consider or analyse their political persuasions.

Traditional liberalists claim that any obligation for journalists to provide reliable and accurate information to enable citizens to question pre-existing beliefs can be achieved by ensuring that there is competition between news media outlets, a wide range of news stories and programmes on each dissemination channel, and a spectrum of views offered within each news story. This, they argue, should ensure a plurality of views are offered to news consumers, allowing the 'truth to emerge' from within the wide range of views put forward. The view states that the diversity of opinions offered would give audiences the ability to "initiate demand and resist persuasion and react to what the media have to offer" (McQuail, 2000: 69). This viewpoint is thought to back up the views of practitioners who cite the presence of pluralism within their stories as their way of highlighting their objectivity and autonomy and defending themselves from accusations that the news media follows a dominance model. The defence follows that as long as a range of conflicting opinions are being put forward then the journalists' own viewpoints (and potential biases) are unable to show through.

Political economists argue that even with plurality in the news media the viewpoints covered would still only fall within a specific range of those viewpoints allowed in a capitalist economy. Hallin created the 'sphere of consensus' to explain this, pinpointing three levels of viewpoints. The first level of stories in the sphere of consensus, Hallin says, will be subjects that will be talked about constantly, within the agreed range of viewpoints. The next level would include subjects just outside the agreed range within a 'sphere of legitimate controversy' where there is a wider range of views but which could be on the fringes of the mainstream news media. The final level falls outside the remit of anything discussed within the news media and is labelled the 'sphere of unacceptable controversy' (Hallin, 1986). Viewpoints in this range, he says, are rarely discussed and often ignored. Herman & Chomsky's 2002 propaganda model backs this up saying it occurs, not through blatant censorship, but through a process that selects and rewards those who see the world in a way that is unchallenging to elite interests. This is developed by Livingstone and Bennett who say that "uncongenial facts and framings usually do not have to be censored because they are mostly not even perceived to exist" (Livingstone and Bennett, 2003: 366). Taking this much further, Bennett's perspective gives the impression that it is not individuals purposively setting an agenda, it is simply done unconsciously following a general consensus in society of what is deemed 'normal'. He uses the label 'indexing norm' to refer to the way that journalists, by routine, rely upon political elites when defining and framing the news agenda, using only voices that are already strong in mainstream political debate.

This 'indexing norm' he says, keeps the news compatible with any shifting political and economic interests whilst at the same time allows journalists the freedom and reassurance that they are communicating responsibly, objectively and in the public interest (Bennett, 1989: 109) whilst maintaining a "steady and rapid supply of stories" (Bennett, 1989: 103).

The index could be seen as a simple guide for political journalists on 'how to gather news.' It may also be argued that it being in place protects journalists from criticisms that their stories are unobjective, biased or lacking in authority. Zaller and Chui say the index allows political journalists to reflect the range of views that exists within the government (Zaller & Chui, 1996: 385) but it could also mean that primary definers (Hall, 1978: 53-77) are able to influence the control of the news media agenda. These primary definers have been described as those who have the power to 'set the agenda' and 'define the terms' of what and who is discussed in the news media. They "translate into a public idiom the statements and viewpoints of the primary definers" (Hall, 1978: 53-77) who range from politicians and political parties to those in business, key pressure groups and respected academics. Their continued presence in the everyday news media means that their views (and the range of views they represent) can become the norm and are able to sway the direction that journalists take, specifically, and the news media take in general. If this were the case, then political economists argue that the news media as the fourth estate are strongly influenced and dependent on many of who sit in the first three estates and, are therefore unlikely to be effective watchdogs. Furthermore, whilst primary definers are virtually "guaranteed access to all the major media – and protected against irresponsible attack – by virtue of their position" (Bennett, 1996: 70), they could be accused of providing an illusion that a plurality of voices are being heard. The argument could then be put that this illusion means that rather than a genuine range of views and increased information being available, there would be more predictability within the constricted limits of the news media.

As issue which could be raised as a concern here is that the filter can pervade not only which stories are covered but then also which views are covered in each story. This filtering could be seen as a way of "justifying certain ways of life as better than others, certain values as superior to others, certain differences worth perpetuating, certain power relationships worth protecting. News journalism is encoded with these beliefs and justifies them" (Harrison, 2006: 128). "The salience of elements on the news agenda influences their salience on the public agenda so ...the lead story on page one, front page versus inside page, the size of the headline, and even the length of a story all communicate information about the salience of the various objects in the news agenda" (Carrol & McCombs, 2003: 37). The theory says that over time, the agenda of the news media becomes the agenda of the public. This implies that there is much power to be gained by setting the agenda of the news media. In this

light, the ability to set the agenda could thus become fiercely contested between political PRs and journalists.

One view put forward is that attempts to control the news media agenda by political PRs have come about as a response to the organizational and bureaucratic systems in place. Boorstin (1977) claimed that some events can be labeled 'pseudo-events' where news has come about "because someone has planned, planted, or incited it" (Boorstin, 1977: 11). Pseudo-events could then be anticipated by journalists, administratively managed by the organizers and coordinated to suit all. Press conferences, for example, can be timed to facilitate news production routines and deadlines. These elements could all help pseudo event organisers (in our case political PRs) to set the news agenda. Lawrence (2000: 9) considers this type of agenda setting through events but instead calls them 'institutionally driven news,' where political institutions set the agendas of news organizations. A response to this is 'event-driven news' where the news event occurs first and then 'story cues' for reporters arise out of those events. As event-driven news gathers momentum, officials and institutions would "need to respond to the news agenda rather than set it" (Lawrence, 2000: 9).

Whilst both Boorstin and Lawrence discuss control of the agenda on a day-to-day basis, theorists working from a political economy perspective seem to make much further reaching, overarching claims as to how the news agenda, and the frames journalists use to describe news, are set. Some researchers have identified individual groups in society (rather than just a pervading elitism in society) who claim to drive the agenda. Altschull (1984) claims that it is advertisers who have a significant influence on journalistic output. Whilst this could ring true in commercial news media cases it could be argued, it fails to explain the wrangles over the agenda which occurred over the Hutton Report as this involved the BBC, a public service broadcaster. Entman's (1989) research concluded that consumers were the most important influencers on news. Turow (1994) states that the owners control journalists and their news gathering processes. Bagdikian (1997) takes this further claiming that it is the large corporate investors who exercise control discussing how, in the USA, both CBS and ABC news staff have been forced to either censor stories or apologise to their management over stories which damaged relations with advertisers (Bagdikian, 1997, preface).

Political economists could then use these examples to dispute that the news media are a neutral 'fourth estate,' seeing them instead as an integral member of the power system. In this argument, the news media will not be the single, over-arching gatekeeper; they will be just another cog making up a wheel of gatekeepers. In fact, following this view, some consider the political news media as entirely ineffective as a watchdog fourth estate. Instead they may believe that they act far more as a guard dog performing "as a sentry not for the community as a whole, but for groups having sufficient power and

influence to create and control their own security systems” with conflict being “reported, but in a constrained way and only on certain issues and under certain structural conditions” (Donohue et al, 1995: 115-6) particularly when external forces are presenting a threat to local leaderships. In this sense, a guard dog journalist may write as if working for an internal newspaper, protecting a consensus community against external forces, reporting the outside to those on the inside. This argument, stating that the news media is acting in an increasingly less intimidating manner, is discussed extensively (albeit from an American perspective) by McChesney (1997) who outlines his fears over the lack of democratic subservience that the US news media currently contains. He also gloomily predicts that corporate culture will overtake the media, and communication industries in general, leaving behind what he calls a spineless news media. Once this subservience is in place, critical theorists argue, the news media organisations have the power to define a world “view which supports their particular interests and values, by controlling what we see and by making it appear natural or obvious” (Harrison, 2006: 127). These theorists could dispute the identity of the group holding this power and influence but seem to agree that some power over the news media does exist that is disputed, not that it exists.

A counter argument, coming from the practitioner perspective, could claim that organisational structures within the newsrooms defend against control and influence from any one specific source. They argue that “objective news reporting is achieved through impartiality, as impartiality is merged into daily routines which support the journalist in an attempt to write accurate news stories” (Harrison, 2006: 145). The argument could run into difficulties however when trying to explain what happens when outside sources infiltrate their bureaucratic structures or when the journalists themselves exude bias (unwillingly and unknowingly) through their own personal and professional socialisation as the political economists allege.

2.2.1.3 A civic forum encouraging debate, a stronger sense of belonging and encouraging participation in the political process

A further expectation of the news media in a representative democracy seems to be providing a form of social coherence, mutual understanding and community belonging. One concept of this can be the idea of public, community or civic journalism (see Curran et al, 1980, Schudson 1998, Glasser 1999 and Rosen 2000) where the news media is approached from a different angle to take a role “as democracy’s cultivator, as well as its chronicler” (Rosen, 2000: 4). Rosen seems to have carved this out as an ideal role for the news media, going beyond the idea of the news media as a participant and suggesting instead that news media get highly integrated with their public and act as a catalyst for change in order to support a healthier public climate (Rosen, 2000: 4). This would potentially involve

a shift from a “journalism of information to journalism of conversation” (Glasser & Craft, 1997). Whilst the idea has legitimacy, it must also be valid to question whether the news media really have the ability to achieve this. The idea of public journalism was heralded with a fanfare in the 1980s but it perhaps has not lived up to expectations and now, whilst thriving on the non-traditional news media outlets such as the internet and podcasting, it does seem to be missing from the traditional outlets. Livingstone and Lunt (1994) argue that its failure in the traditional news media channels stems from the fact that the news media only offer commodified news which sees the public as consumers and seeks to set opinions through persuasion – rather than as individuals trying to achieve a consensus through providing a pluralised set of rational arguments.

A different concept, which some say could be more achievable, is the notion of the news media providing some form of civic forum (Norris, 2000: 25-28) or public sphere (Habermas, 1979 & 1984). This idea, highlighted by Habermas in 1979, has been described by Thompson (1992) as a notional space, existing between society and the state. It describes a social setting, usually informal, non geographical, where the public can access information and become involved in debate, discussion and deliberation. It would be in this sphere that “something approaching public opinion can be formed,” (Habermas, 1984: 110) encouraging citizen participation, in society specifically, and in democracy more generally. This facilitation of public participation in the political process, it is argued, is particularly important to the news media in providing the ability to offer a plurality of views and opinions (as discussed in 2.2.1.2). This is described eloquently by Mill:

“The particular evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation, those who dissent from the opinion even more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error” (Mill, 1859).

Arguments over the value of a public sphere appear to be rare – arguments over whether it is achievable however are more common. Academics seem to point to evidence that, in the queue of groups trying to control the news media, the public stand very close to the back, far behind owners, elites in society, advertisers, practitioners and political PRs. Others however, may claim that the public have had too much influence on the content of the news media, tempting them to cover more facetious and lightweight stories (commonly phrased as ‘dumbing down’) to the detriment of democratically and political heavyweight ones.

This civic forum, or public sphere, whilst highly desirable, requires the involvement of a key constituent, the public. Research has been conducted to understand the levels of public involvement in the media, and politics in general and there have been many concerns voiced⁹. It should then be considered is why the public may be disengaged and uninvolved in the news media. One viewpoint is that they believe they are neglected by the news media as journalists and politicians battle out a private fight in a public forum but ignoring the public themselves. Gibbons sums this up perfectly in her submission to the Hansard society's work into 'Parliament and the public' stating that "Westminster, the world of politics and Parliament, remain a closed book to many. The result is a lack of engagement in the politics of the country and low turnout at elections" (Gibbons, 2006: 32). To go in-depth into this argument is not possible here due to space and focus limitations but it is an area of importance and interest to this thesis.

2.2.1.4 A check and balance against any abuses of power.

The final responsibility of the news media which comes out of the Full News Standard and Ideal News Economy is to act as a check and balance on the three original political estates; the institutions of the Commons, the Lords and the Church. As Montesquieu wrote, this separation of powers is said to allow each estate to check upon the power and self-interest of the others (Held, 1996: 82-88). Placing the news media as the fourth of these estates¹⁰ can allow it to play a significant role in watching over all estates, in an autonomous way, to ensure they do not overstep their constitutional role or authority. In political coverage especially, this could require the news media to critically analyse, scrutinise and interpret political actions and messages (Norris, 2000: 28-29). This viewpoint (also known as the participatory model in Cohen, 1963) could be seen to reflect the strong aspirations that the public have towards the news media. If the public see the news media as a key member of a representative democracy, then they may want to be a representative of themselves as well as a critic of the government (McQuail, 2000: 159). The argument states that these elements are essential in ensuring participation and involvement within the system. In short, it could be considered to be a role where journalists act as watchdogs to watch over those in power (Fjaestad and Holmlov, 1976: 108-114).

In an age where two of the main political estates, the Lords and the Church, have lost many of their formal, and even informal, powers and now are known mainly for their symbolic role, this watchdog function could be assessed as being more essential. Without it, it may be argued, only one traditional power estate (the Commons) would exist. In this instance, their role may be highly inflated risking their power rising to a dangerous level. In acting as a fourth estate, the news media would be able to

⁹ Bought together by groups like the Hansard society who study public engagement in politics and democracy.

¹⁰ A term which has been attributed by the historian Thomas Carlyle to Edmund Burke in the 18th century

act in the same role as the other estates, allowing each one to check upon the power and self-interest of the others (Held, 1996: 82-88). In aspiring to ensure that none of the three original estates abuse their power, nor become too singularly powerful, the news media could challenge existing political truths and scrutinize those in authority in order to hold officials accountable for their actions. Under this responsibility, those working in the news media would be tasked with exposing official corruption, scandals and government failures (Norris, 2000: 20). The function would task the journalist, and political journalists in particular, to oversee officials, protect the public from possible abuses of power (Scammell and Semetko, 2000: xiii) and inform the public when these events occur.

Viewpoints from across the spectrum often seem to agree that the watchdog role could, in an ideal system, override in importance many other functions of journalists in the news media and to dictate the form in which the news media should be organised (Curran, 2001: 83). This view has been elaborated by a practitioner, a former political journalist who when describing how he understood his role, described what could be termed the classic watchdog stance: "We have a job to do – not just reporting what the government is doing or plans to do, but asking whether is it doing it or is right to be thinking of doing it" (Brunson, 2000: 284).

The function of a political journalist as a check and balance seems to only work however if the news media do not only meet the needs of their audience but also that journalists should ensure their content provides a diversity of quality information and culture to the public, allows expression of opinions, gives adequate support for the democratic political system, the judicial system and respects individual and general human interest rights (McQuail, 2000: 144). In short, the journalist should be working in the public interest yet there is also a debate over how public interest should be protected. Should it cover the free market, majoritarian view that journalists should give the public what it wants, or the paternalistic, Unitarian view that it should be decided by reference to a single dominant value or ideology? At its most basic terms however it could be argued that it involves the journalist remembering to (a) be accountable to the public (as their audience and as citizens) and (b) remain objective and independent.

The idea of the news media being seen as a fourth estate can be a contentious one when it is considered in relation to the concept of using a bench mark of the 'public interest' to lay down aspirational boundaries of where a journalist should be allowed to act as a watchdog and where it could be seen as plain intrusion. This notion of the public interest gives the impression of being particularly important both generally to the debate on who runs the news media but also specifically to the idea of the fourth estate. As such, the part that, theoretically, public interest should play, will be

investigated further in the next section however it must be remembered that public interest is a ideal, an aspiration, not necessarily a rule.

2.2.2 In whose interest?

There are perhaps three main interests in which journalists could claim to be working in; their own, their organisations (and by transfer the organisations' owners) and the public's.

Claiming to report according to the public interest could be seen as having two particular advantages for journalists. It could provide them with a safety net against which to defend their actions (McQuail, 2001: 98) and gives them an opportunity to integrate themselves strongly in public life. Research has shown that there is strong support within the public for proper investigative journalism of matters which the public see as in their interest so journalists could take advantage of both these elements. The work could be damaged however if journalists, as a group, are accused of abusing their opportunities to work as investigators on behalf of the public eye¹¹ (Tuchman, 1972). If they then defend what could be considered excessive intrusion by claiming they are following their public interest responsibilities they should then surely ensure they do not ignore other issues the public want to see investigated. This led Ericson to conclude that they are then limited to a "telescopic vision" (Ericson et al, 1989: 120).

A further potential problem with journalists attempting to gatekeep under the 'public interest' defence is that it may not always tie in with a 'market interest.' The changes in the news media, in particular with regards to increased competition and tabloidisation, seem to have led to an increased importance of the market. Debates about the role of the market in media often come back to one point: can something (or someone) be as equally loyal to the market as to the public interest? If the news media organisation is to be viable and competitive in the market then it could well need to rely on information subsidies – especially if its rivals are already doing so. Information subsidies (as mentioned earlier) could be seen to counter the idea that journalists are only putting forward information, news and stories which are entirely in the public interest. This dichotomy is expressed by Hargreaves who labels modern journalism the "plaything of corporate public relations experts" and says it is now "not so much a public service as a public health hazard" (Hargreaves, 2003: 12). O'Neill also backs this up, but does so more bluntly, saying the "market undermines journalism's capacity to provide for an informed and critical citizenry" (O'Neill, 1992: 22). He reasons this on the way that the gathering of news is considered so expensive that costs can be dramatically reduced if news can be made from information subsidies provided by PRs. Becoming as economic as possible, and ensuring the satisfaction of consumers (whilst discouraging diversity and originality) could be

¹¹ Tuchman rejected the reverence for objectivity by claiming it was simply a means for achievement of strategic aims.

considered to go against the principles of collecting, hosting and disseminating as many viewpoints as are on offer.

The notion of the market interest could however be reconciled by considering the argument that something is only in the public interest if the public are interested. It would seem if they are interested that they would buy news media publications and if they are not, they won't. In this way it could be argued the market is at work, and if a journalist investigates something which will appeal to their readership and will help sell their paper then they may be able to claim they are working in the public interest. A former editor of *The Times* took this view: "we are not there to provide a public service for a particular profession or, for that matter, for a particular chamber...Newspapers are about providing people with news" (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995: 7).

Gieber has looked deeply into the role that the public interest plays in journalism and says the press have an institutional licence to gather and make public the news. He says: "society rightfully can expect the press to maintain critical surveillance of the social arena and to provide independent and appraisal" (Gieber, 1964: 223). He implies that reporters must remain independent from pressures from sources and distanced from any pressures placed upon them from the news bureaucracy in which they work. Any attempted pressure on journalists by political PRs could potentially be seen in a positive way in terms of democratic function. Some seem to have claimed that, the more cynical journalists become and the more they want to expose some of the activities of persuasion used by political PRs and politicians, the better served the public interest is. Eldridge develops this further saying that "any journalist who is prepared to make visible the processes by which the news of the day comes to be defined and organised, including the struggles this can entail, with powerful interests and groups, does democracy a service" (Eldridge, 1993: 17).

A problem could however arise when we consider the definitions of where the public interest lies. There has been a great deal of work on the role of the journalist acting in the public interest¹² but an exact definition of 'public interest' (despite being regularly debated in both the press and academia) is a rare find. A simple definition could be drawn from the field of public planning which says that something is "in the public interest if it serves the ends of the whole society rather than those of some sectors" (Banfield & Meyerson, 1955). In journalism practice this could mean that, whatever else the journalist does, they should always have in mind the wider benefit of society, especially in cultural and political life. The lack of a definitive definition however raises the point that if neither academics, nor the public, have yet to define the point at which something falls inside the remit of being 'in the public interest,' it must surely be difficult for journalists, working at breakneck pace, day after day, to

¹² See also McQuail (2001: 69).

analyse every story and every angle and decide whether that is in the public interest. Alger claims that without a firm boundary to place the public interest against, the news media have become attack dogs (Alger, 1996: 191) standing on the heels of politicians, waiting to catch them out, constantly looking for a way to trip them up. Hargreaves continues the attack on overuse of the public interest defence stating that it provokes a scepticism that “has started to eat at the soul of American democratic values” and he is not alone in this view.

2.2.3 Professionalism

Finally, to allow an assessment of the sources of power, the impetus towards gatekeeping and an understanding of the role of political PRs and journalists it should be apt to cast a professional-organisational viewpoint (McNair, 2003: 63) over the arena. This can allow us to analyse the activities and requirements of political PRs and journalists and to consider how this impacts upon their development. The perspective focuses on the professional culture but also the limitations imposed by the “news form, deadline pressures, and other elements of routine journalism practice” (McNair, 2003: 63) all which can impact upon the why gatekeeping functions are performed. Many aspects, it could be argued, have been learnt by practitioners throughout their training and socialisation although other aspects may simply be a response to organisational structures and professional norms.

A debate has grown in recent years on how an increased professionalism within political journalism has affected the relationship with those in politics. A decision as to whether journalists can claim to belong to a profession¹³ is still disputed yet they could claim to, and aim to, work in a professional manner. Specific work conducted by journalists, and their attitude to that work, could assert this. If we see this view as being built upon the Ideal News Standard discussed earlier then we would see society expecting the individual journalist, and their news media organisation as a whole, to serve the general population and act in the ‘public interest’ (as discussed above). Considering Philip Elliott’s view that “professionalism is when skill and competence in the performance of routine tasks become elevated to the occupational ideal” (Elliott 1972: 17), it could be argued that following specified news values achieves this.

Tuchman defines professionalism as coming from the high degree of objectivity characterised in journalism, something in itself which she says has become a professional ideology. This objectivity

¹³ There has been a great amount of debate as to whether journalists can be considered to be professionals. It has been argued that the knowledge base of journalists is not as deep as other professional groups, that they behave selectively with sources whereas other professionals must deal with all equally and that they deny a responsibility for any unintentionally negative consequences of their reports (Kepplinger & Koecher, 1990: 307). Those who discount journalists from holding a professional status, do so for the way that they apply a stronger standard to others than themselves and that, unlike law or medicine, there is no licensing procedure, standardised training nor any way for wayward or unscrupulous members to be expelled.

could push journalists to organise themselves into associations, to form voluntary, non-governmental press councils and draw up principles of good practice or codes of ethics¹⁴ all of which, according to Tuchman, signal a profession (Tuchman, 1978). This, she asserts, could insulate journalists from many of the pressures created by both the public and management.

A push towards displaying objectivity could cover journalists from some pressures, by both public and their own management, but the clear lack of boundaries (as described by Schudson, 1978) means that whilst members of many other professions consider their roles in society to be of high value and importance, none (with the arguable exception of politicians) have to work in the public eye as much as journalists. Their work is read and reviewed on a daily basis by millions of members of the public. If we argue that they have a central role within British democratic life and believe each individual journalist has a rival ready to expose any unprofessional behaviour, then the pressure on journalists must be immense. This would increase the strain on journalists to be, and to be seen to be, upholding their relevant code of conduct and adhering to the rules religiously.

The journalist's interaction with a political source could also impact upon their ability to work professionally. This implies their relationship with sources is vital. Whilst earlier academic studies seem to have been discussed the news source in terms of a piece of information or content, it could now be legitimate to see the news source in terms of an agent or as a person. A result could be an assertion that, relationships have got more complex but also more important. Practitioners would then state that it is essential for journalists to act in the manner to which their professional status belies whilst retaining an element of cunning when it comes to their source relationships. Their argument would state that without these relationships they would be unable to operate. By simply accepting however the perspectives stating that journalists are controlled by owners (Turow, 1994), advertisers (Altschull, 1984) or corporate investors (Bagdikian, 1997) then the journalist aiming to be professional by acting in neutral, independent and accurate manner may have their authority significantly diminished.

Like journalists, it could also be debated as to whether political PRs could be considered to be members of a profession. Whether they act in a professional manner though, is of importance. One factor, similar to journalism, could be the existence of a code of conduct. Special advisors had a code introduced in 2001 which included a section dealing with news media contacts. This allowed them to brief the news media on issues with a degree of political commitment but not those which are purely party political. It also stated that all contacts with the news media must be authorised by the relevant minister, relayed to the Departmental Head of Information and that they must steer clear of political

¹⁴ More on the codes of conduct can be found in Tunstall (1996: 141).

controversy. For those considered to be political PRs outside of government specific voluntary codes (such as those from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations or the Association of Professional Political Consultants) exist however it could be argued that, as these groups are still young, their codes of conduct are less firmly cemented compared to those for journalists.

The professionalisation of political PRs was highlighted in a 2000 documentary: *News from Number 10*¹⁵ (Cockerell, 2000). It portrayed what looked to be a well choreographed, organised news media machine with a government well placed to react to the news media through a media monitoring unit, a strategic monitoring unit, a large press team, a 9am meeting for all press officers, time set aside to practice lines and scripts written for major statements. Visits and events seemed to be choreographed to ensure the resulting pictures were flattering and politically advantageous. This attention to detail does seem to be neither unusual nor constrained to Number 10. In fact many in politics admit to building media contacts and learning “how political correspondents think and operate” (Boothroyd, 2001: 146).

The level of perceived professionalisation, on the political PR side, as described here, has been said to have been inspired by a ‘permanent campaign’ where the line between campaigning and governing has blurred. This could indicate a situation where government specifically link policy and communications to build and keep public approval high. They can do this by consulting pollsters and media experts on many areas of policy seeing “the techniques of electioneering become intertwined with those of governing...those where the coterie of professional consultants on advertising, public opinion, marketing and strategic news management become more co-equal actors with politicians, assuming a more influential role within government” (Norris, 2000: 161).

In unpacking the roles of the political news players we can pull apart the expectations placed upon journalists, in their many guises as members of the democratic environment, we can analyse their public or market interests and can discuss their personal levels of professionalism. This provides a tapestry of the roles and responsibilities, official, unofficial and independent. Next we need to consider how the roles that they undertake fit in with the notion of gatekeeping in the 21st century.

2.3 Challenging the existing assumptions of gatekeeping and the players involved

Gatekeeping theory has been critiqued as inadequate to describe the processes and choices which are now being made in a more complex, diverse and technologically advanced age. Two of these critiques

¹⁵ A documentary in which Michael Cockerell spent three months filming Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's press secretary for 6 years. (Cockerell, 2000)

seem to deserve particular attention in order to understand whether the theory still has the ability to adequately explain the processes within the political news media today. The first critique states that gatekeeping theory considers the role of journalists in making editorial decisions but ignores the strength of external players. The second, focuses on the idea that gatekeeping as a function itself is outdated in a technologically advanced age. I will consider both here before suggesting that, however valid these critiques are, they may, or may not, show that gatekeeping as a concept is outdated. Maybe they could just show that it is simply that the concept needs to be updated?

2.3.1 The new gatekeepers?

Considering the issue of the strength of non journalists in the political news industry it is necessary to understand that the levels of mutual reliance between political PRs and journalists and the concerns this could raise from the idealistic viewpoint this reliance could have a strong negative impact on the ability of the journalist to be independent, fair and autonomous and on the ability of the political news media to be able to act as a check and balance. The reliance on each other could mean it is necessary for there to be “a continual adjustment or adaptation of their relationships to ensure continuity despite the conflict between them” (Franklin, 1994: 16).

With it being suggested that information is the prize over which journalists and their sources battle, Tunstall’s exchange model (Tunstall, 1996) highlights that, despite the news media and their sources holding different goals, they do have a mutual reliance with their relationship offering potential benefits to both groups and each group requiring the other in order to fulfil their interests and purposes. Alger acknowledges how the two groups need each other as “politicians use the media to communicate with each other and the public, and the media need government officials as sources for their major stories” (Alger, 1996: 190). More than this, it could be argued that political stories are often the result of a power struggle between journalists trying to control sources and sources trying to control the news product that the public receives (Hargreaves, 2003).

Looking from a practical angle it could be levelled that a basic flaw of the system could simply be that journalists are reliant for information on those they are tasked with watching over. Just how reliant they are, and how well they tilt the balance of power their way could have a large impact upon their ability to be an effective fourth estate. For this reason, the control and ownership of news media content and access seems to gain relevance in being able to understand whether the news media is able to act solely in the public interest, or more in its own interest, compromising on key public interest elements in order to be able to gather stories and gain exclusives.

There are various views on who holds the balance of power but any position where the balance of power is not strongly focused on the political journalists seems to be highlighting that the check and balance system does not work as would be expected in a fully functioning fourth estate news media. A position where the balance of power is strongly tilted towards the political PR means that questions can need to be asked about whether the news media is able to live up to the public's expectations in general and their fourth estate concerns specifically.

Some researchers seem to now argue that sources are now in control of access and content. They state that some sources (and in our case political PRs) could have overstepped their positions and taken advantage of the pressures on journalists. The argument follows that journalists must establish regular contacts with informed insiders and experts in order to secure "timely, authoritative or otherwise inaccessible information, especially in advance of competitors" (McQuail, 2000: 288). The journalist's sources can then become their making, or breaking, and they must nurture and develop relationships on a continuous basis. Jones (1995) says that journalists are finding it hard to stand up to political PRs as the PRs use increasing numbers of tactics to get their own way (Barnett and Gaber, 2001: 102). Gans (1980: 116) and Barnett and Gaber (2001: 100-101) both put forward the opinion that political sources have recently managed the tilt the balance of power in their direction. Barnett and Gaber claim this is due to Labour's knowledge and thirst for influencing the news media, the proliferation of outlets for political news increasing the number of news media bids for interviews and that because so many new researchers came from outside the Westminster Village they are not able to benefit from the contacts with senior politicians and must instead go through political PRs (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 100-101). One political source has even been captured saying that people would be horrified by the degree to which journalists prostitute themselves, allowing political PRs the final clearance of the picture, headline and all copy in supposedly un-PR-able newspapers (Street, 2001: 146). Franklin calls this a "case of politicians hijacking the media" (Franklin, 1994: 8).

Other researchers argue that whilst the presence of sources in general is not new (for the historical perspective see chapter three) and that political PRs have been in place for many years, recently they have become more sophisticated in their efforts to manage and learn journalistic news values, understand the technical constraints on newsgathering and take into consideration the commercial prerogatives (McNair, 1999: 130). Politicians, many would argue, have always been keen to get favourable coverage but it is said, what is different now, is the method used rather than the practice. This could be seen as evident from the way that levels of news media releases from Whitehall doubled after New Labour were elected¹⁶ (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 121) as did the number of special advisors¹⁷

¹⁶ 1995 – 5712 a year to 1998 – 10,303 a year

¹⁷ From 38 in 1997 in Major's government – to 84 in 2006 (Hansard, 2006)

(Jones, 1999: 73) with nearly a third of these working for the Prime Minister alone and a high proportion of these being engaged in media relations work (Jones 1999: 67). This, it has been argued, helped build an opinion in the news media that “spin doctors are simply now so much more visible than in the past” (Seymore-Ure, 2000: 159). It also appears to have created a view that journalists are now more aware of the efforts made to influence their coverage and often “include analysis of these efforts as part of their reportage” (McNair, 1999: 137). Part of this method could be political PRs taking advantage of the pressures for time, copy and information that journalists “must rely heavily upon PR information subsidies” (Davis, 2002: 1). If the media are short staffed they must rely upon PR handouts so can neither independently investigate stories (Taylor, 2004) nor challenge political PRs over content.

Political PRs, if they are using these techniques in an attempt to control political journalists, would be adopting a more active persona, challenging the authority of the news media as a fourth estate. They would be acting with a far less respectful and deferential attitude, perhaps leading to a “new balance of influence between politicians and the media” (Molony, 2000: 107) where political PRs not only try to set content but also the agenda.¹⁸ This could result, Franklin warns, in the fourth estate news media “being overrun by a ‘fifth estate’ of public relations practitioners and press officers” (Franklin, 1998: 4).¹⁹ If this is the case, then there could well be a change in attitude regarding the way journalists and their political sources would work on a day-to-day basis.

On an opposite tack, some researchers state that journalists are still in firm control of their sources and the perceptions that political PRs have too many powers to manipulate is overstated as it is the journalist with the public facing role not the PR (Walker, 2002). Walker says they are still able to resemble the attack dogs (Alger, 1996) however this could appear to be over simplistic. A more realistic suggestion instead could be that the relationship is instead a “classic dysfunctional family; in exchange for enduring abuse, one partner gets to make most of the decisions” (Fallows, 1996: 197). It is argued that sometimes “journalists succeed in making government officials look like liars” (Fallows, 1996: 197) and sources are bullied or punished through the gossip columns (Kurtz, 1998: 106). There is also a case however to argue that politicians do have an influence (especially regarding public broadcasting services) and without their content, journalists would have nothing to write about. In this light, the need for each other is very strong and this would indicate that political PRs have become not the, but certainly one of a group of, gatekeepers.

¹⁸ For more on how journalists and sources attempt to set the agenda see: Iyengar & Kinder (1987) and McCombs & Shaw (1977).

¹⁹ For more on PRs as a fifth estate see Molony (2000: 58).

To add a further dimension to this, a perspective could also be considered which views that there is a constantly changing dynamic where the balance of power tilts regularly depending on events, internal and external factors. This viewpoint, usually thought to come from practitioners, may indicate a mutual dependence between politicians and political journalists that has led some to raise concerns about extensive, and undemocratic collaboration. A defence to this accusation would be that a “shifting balance of power ensures that no one ends up being consistently dominant” (Cook, 1989: 30) alongside the view that “collaboration does not amount to domination” (McNair, 1999: 126). Despite this, there could still be concerns about how, if the day-to-day relationship dynamic is based on mutual dependence, that even if journalists are “not ‘dominated’ by a source, they are still able to (as the political economists would state) gradually absorb source values and perspectives until source and reporter become virtual allies” (Negrine, 1994: 126). If this were to be the case the news media could not be considered to be fulfilling any expectations or any type of effective fourth estate role as their main allegiance is neither to their audience, nor to the public. This shifting balance has been described by Gans (1980) as a news organisation operating a tug-of-war between sources and consumers.

The opposite end of the pendulum lies a view that mutual dependence does not encourage collusion but actually promotes conflict. Blumler and Gurevitch state that the relationship could actually be considered to be adversarial with the relationship pivoting on a conflict of interest between journalists and politicians (and thus also political PRs) (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981: 470). They have discussed the idea that in a liberal democracy, with a pre-supposition towards the fallibility of the wielders of power, it could be necessary for there to be an adversarial relationship between those holding the parliamentary power and the press, to allow the press to hold politicians accountable. Ingham is also an advocate of this view and develops it to its normative conclusion that the government and news media live in a “permanent and natural state of tension” with a relationship which is “essentially cannibalistic.” He says they feed off each other but with neither knowing who is next on the menu (Franklin, 1994: 12). This model has been criticised however for its narrowness and cynicism over the positive ways that politicians and journalists can work collectively and effectively. It provides, the critique says, “no mechanism for understanding the enormous amount of cooperation and even collaboration that takes place” (Grossman & Rourke, 1976) and ignores the process of assimilation taking place in the Westminster Village due to the many mutual interests between the two groups.

One of the main concerns as far as those trying to ensure the news media work fulfil expectations as an effective fourth estate and information supplier could come if levels of collaboration between journalists and sources reach a point where the journalists ‘distributive’ role starts to look weak (Gieber & Johnson, 1961) and conflicts with the expectations of journalistic independence. If the public then begin to believe that this is the case, all the players involved could be left vulnerable to

accusations of suppressing or manipulating information in the interest of certain actors or institutions (Chibnall, 1977 & Fishman, 1980). This view is taken further by some commentators who discuss the perception of an 'invisible' contract between the two players where an unspoken agreement exists stating what can and can't be said. Sergeant describes this unspoken contract as causing frequent battles to take place over the unwritten rules of the relationship (Sergeant, 2001: 124). The rules referred to here are not rules that could be galvanised into a formal code. They are more an informal 'contract' designed to maintain a positive politician-media relationship. This, it could be argued, acknowledges the reliance each has on the other, while exploiting the institutional characteristics of both sets of actors for maximum advantage, possibly coming under some form of professional norm. For the political PRs, this would require giving the news media organisation what it wants, in terms of news or entertainment, while exerting some influence over how that something is mediated and presented to the audience (McNair, 1999: 129).

The acknowledgement of this 'contract' indicates that those from a political economic viewpoint would see the journalist as a conspirator in the power structure of governance, regarding themselves as equal power holders to the legislature in the political sphere. Some argue that relationships between the two involve collusion to such an extent that it comes at the detriment of the public, and the society on behalf of whom they (idealistically) work. One such phrase penned to describe this, is that of journalists and politicians "sleeping together" (Cook, 1989: 30). This conspiratorial perspective could be illustrated with descriptions of social events at the Prime Minister's residence where political correspondents cement their working relationships with the Downing Street press officers and with accounts of journalists playing football matches against special advisors (Jones, 1999: 185). The conspiratorial perspective could also be evidenced by pointing to the many bars (there are thirteen drinking places in the Palace of Westminster²⁰) in Parliament where alcohol acts as a lubricant for the "institutionalised intercourse between the Lobby-men and the politicians" (Cockerell et al, 1984: 41).

Viewing the balance of power from this perspective could push the relationship between the news media and the government (or at a day-to-day level, journalists and the political PRs) to be seen with an adversarial backdrop (Alger, 1996: 190) with undertones of fundamental ambivalence, oscillating "between trust and suspicion" (Franklin, 1994: 14). It has been described by Gaber (Select Committee on Public Administration; 2002) as a state of collusive conflict.

²⁰ The Palace of Westminster is the physical home of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

2.3.2 Technological advancement

A second critique that could be levelled at the gatekeeping concept is that it is outdated in a technologically advanced media age. This viewpoint could be seen to have some credibility, especially in the area of political blogging. This relatively new phenomena seems to have grown expedientially, maybe in reaction to the use of gatekeeping (by journalists, political PRs or others) in the traditional media, with bloggers going directly to an audience to spread their viewpoints on political stories. They have increasingly sizable audiences and are becoming more important on the political landscape. Some (see for example www.iaindale.blogspot.com and <http://5thnovember.blogspot.com>) seem to have such reach (and some of it highly influential) that they not only list the government departments and news media organisation names that read their blogs (captured through the ip addresses) but that they have also set a company called '*message space*' which places advertising on their sites directed at political audiences.

Whilst lots of research has begun into the world of blogging, there are not yet many published studies into the role, power and influence of the political blogging area. This is a shame as one area which needs to be covered here is questioning how far removed from gatekeeping these bloggers are in reality. Whilst they may have been set up to go directly to people – bypassing the tradition news media routes, the influential political blogs now seem to feed the traditional (print press) with stories and have become seen as valid news sources themselves. They have also been used as a way of bringing litigious stories into the mainstream news media. Once a blogger has posted a story, print and broadcast journalists can then claim the stories were already circulating and that they are simply repeating information already in the public domain. In this way, they can cover stories they would not have covered before. Bloggers could be seen as political PRs for their own opinions, forwarding these opinions onto journalists. They could then be considered simply another gate in the chain. Some bloggers have also applied for press passes for parliamentary briefings and so could be seen as joining their journalism colleagues in using traditional news content dissemination channels, only with a new way of relaying it to their end audience. In this way, it seems that although it could be valid to claim that the way gatekeeping processes are often described can be seen as out of date and less relevant, there could actually be a valid argument that the activity of gatekeeping is very much alive, just being carried out in a different way, by more people over an elongated set of media communication and dissemination channels. The choice processes are still strong, it is the number and type of gates, and those overseeing them, the argument says, that have developed and grown.

Alongside blogging, the advanced technology age has also an effect on the focus of the entire media. Having started from a basis in mass media, through newspapers, national broadcast channels and

radio, where 'mass' is the important world, the defining word for media in the 21st century seems to be 'personalised'. This is strong in the news media and it does not just stem from blogging and the other avenues offered by the internet. We have personalised news updates being emailed to people, on demand, as well as at specified times. There are 'red buttons' which can be pressed on digital television to get news feeds as and when the member of the public wants them. Any number of specialist interest groups can easily write, design and disseminate newsletters and information to their supporters. Communication companies can use guerrilla media tactics to ensure their messages are seen in unexpected places; Beer mats, golf tees, the sides of buildings (including parliament), water bottle labels and even message wrist bands are all used. All these tactical activities can be tailored towards a specific audience, disseminated in places where only that audience will be and incorporate messages that will appeal and resonate with that audience. These elements all have the potential to cut out the journalist from the message dissemination process. In actuality however, it must be considered whether the journalist is still choosing the content or messaging that goes behind 'the red buttons', the daily emails, the guerrilla tactics? In many cases someone still needs to be in the gatekeeping seat to gather and filter the stories and information that come through. The new technological age may then have the ability to be highly personalised but much of it, it could be said, is derived from sources highly similar to the mass media channels in which gatekeeping grew up.

These developments in the theory bring us to a point where we could see how an updated gatekeeping theory could be used, in the modern day political news industry to explain the processes involved in controlling the news. It is the dimensions and the dynamics which impact strongly upon how gatekeeping as a theory still stands in 2006. Identifying the way the multi-dimensional aspects and the many dynamics upon a news story can build a notion of a far more complex gatekeeping model than the one which White drew up in the 1950s. Despite this it is a notion which works today none-the-less.

2.4 Conclusion

Looking back through this chapter, the discussion has led us to a point where it could be argued that gatekeeping has been an influential model in understanding some of the processes and elements within the political news media. It could also be argued that the chapter has also shown that, even at 50 years old, the model still has some validity, albeit with certain modifications. In its traditional, purist form, the gatekeeping model as shown by White back in the early 1950s is undisputedly outdated but it appears not to be completely dead. Whilst there are changes to the original model, there are also many similarities.

The changes from the original gatekeeping model seem to be threefold; the growth in the dimensions involved, the growth in the numbers and types of people involved and the trend to move towards a personalised rather than mass media. The dimensions have not only grown from a sender-receiver model into a much more complex almost circular system of message dissemination but also see an increase in the number of gates positioned along the way. There is no longer justice in describing the gatekeeping process as one where a piece of information enters the news flow at one end, get passed or rejected by a gatekeeper and then get disseminated or dropped. More credibility can be given to the notion if it is excepted that the information will enter the news flow only when political PRs has allowed it to, then the information will pass through many gates in a whole system of news production before being published and then perhaps feeding other news products, procedures or channels. There are also many more people and groups involved in the process now. Although the list is long, and probably growing, the group focused upon in this thesis, the political PRs, are particularly prevalent. This group, who did not even exist perhaps 30 years ago when Tunstall made his first foray into the world of political journalism now have a strong influence on what information enters the news flow systems and how that information is processed, understood and projected by political journalists. They are able, in many cases, to influence the content of the news, and the way that content is produced. The introduction of this new group into the world of gatekeeping could have made a significant impact on the ability of political journalists to carry out the expectations placed upon them. The certainty, and level, of this impact is something which seems important to investigate. Finally, the move away from a simple form of 'mass' media towards one which is personalised, streamed for the individual not the whole and can be tailored to specific audiences is one which has not diminished, but has certainly changed, many of the traditionally accepted methods of gatekeeping.

Despite these apparent changes there are still some elements of gatekeeping that have stayed strong, and continue to be so. Many of the early adopters of the new technological advancements spoke of the death of the gatekeeper. Why would people need journalists filtering out their news when they could search for the news they wanted to hear themselves? Whilst this was a valid assertion at the time, the logistics of this seem to have become the stumbling block to this vision. People may well use technology to make their news consumption quicker and more focused but they are still relying on someone to do the filtering for them. They do not have time to read every news wire (which even still will have been filtered by a journalist and editor before being posted) and need organisations to pull together the news content that suits their outlook. There will be many more outlets for them to choose from, and methods of personalising that content through technological systems, but it is still not 'pure' news. Not only will gatekeepers still be involved in the process but there will actually be more gatekeepers involved as someone will be choosing what news stories match which choices. In this way, even the audience is becoming a gatekeeper by only choosing to accept news they already have

an interest in. Visions of journalists being replaced by computers have also failed to materialise as journalists are still necessary to gather the news that comes from events and ensure that the stories given to them by political PRs are not only newsworthy but that the other sides of any issues are adequately covered.

Finally, it seems important to recognise how all the new critical elements of the gatekeeping processes: the use of new technology, the emergence of new players into the system, the multiple flows and roles and more complex engagement with players in the political news media actually add to a fascinating area of communications theory. Without this thread of a gatekeeping notion drawing them altogether, it would be difficult to explain how many of the processes within the political news industry work. It would also be difficult to build up a picture of how these elements developed and began to interweave their way into the political PR industry. One other such way of doing this however would be to consider the historical development of the political news industry, as distinct from the individual news media and political arena. This is something that we will focus on in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE - THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAYERS IN THE POLITICAL NEWS INDUSTRY – AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

3.1 Introduction

To successfully analyse the growth, development and defining moments of the groups involved in the UK political news industry; notably, political PRs and political journalists, we need to consider the history of political news. We need to analyse how and when political journalism developed, understand the pressure points which led to the creation and development of political PR and consider the growth of the political news industry.

An analysis of the development of the political journalist for this thesis¹ begins at a point around the 1730s. Newspapers began springing up at the end of the previous century but there were strong rules forbidding the reporting of MPs' debates or parliamentary activities. It wasn't until the 1730s that journalists began to find ways around the rules and something resembling political journalism could be said to have begun. The development of something similar to Political PR did not come till much later though, well over 100 years later, around the 1850s, when politicians began to realise the power of the press to disseminate their messages. This disparity in developmental dates means that before we can tally the relationship between the two groups, we must focus initially on the growth of political journalism. Only when we have understood the historical foundations of those who wrote initially about political life, can we consider the eventual response to this, by those in politics. This response was a long time coming and took many years before it emerged into a political PR industry of the type that would be recognised today.

To highlight the key developments in each area, this chapter will begin by showing a timeline of developments, placed into rough periods of development. These periods run from the birth of political journalism in 1695 when pre-publication censorship was abolished for newspapers, through to the recent changes by reviews, committees and investigations about the roles to be played in the political news industry in the last few years.

Much of the history of political journalism in the Commons was lost when the House was bombed in 1941 during the Second World War (Tunstall, 1970: 109). I will attempt to describe their growth and development from the information which does exist though. The political PRs (in this thesis; departmental civil servants, special advisors and the party political PRs) have varying

¹ Others have claimed that the beginning of news could be placed with the origins of language (Hartley, 1988) or with the origins of communication (Carpenter, 1946 and Allan, 1999)

levels of historical documentation. The changing roles of departmental press officer staff have been quite well documented and so will be more covered extensively here. The development of the special advisor, especially in their recent incarnation as a media advisor, has also been discussed widely and there have been various government reviews held to consider their specific role. This chapter may, however, lack some comment on those working within political party teams. This should not be taken as an implied bias, more a reflection of the previous lack of research on this area. This is a gap I hope my own research will begin to fill.

A consideration of the periodic timelines highlights that there has been a steady stream of continuous changes which have shaped the role of political journalists today. There have been five significant periods of development and consolidation in the political news industry – across both political PR and journalism. It is these periods which drive the analysis throughout the chapter. In order to place these periods in context, where it is possible, I will include a short summary of seminal, relevant research piece to provide a case study highlighting the atmosphere in which the political news industry was working at that time. These should illustrate how the structural developments occurring in journalism and politics generally have affected the day to day lives of those working within this sphere.

3.2 General Development

3.2.1 Timeline of developments in the political news industry

Overall timeline (Chart 3a)

- Birth of political news
- Formalisation of political news industry
- Permanency in the political news industry
- Market philosophy shaping the political news industry
- Convolution within the political news industry

3.2.2 Periodisation of developments

There are five periods to consider in this chapter, spanning over 300 years from 1695 to 2005. The dates given to define the periods are not exact dates as there were no decisive defining dates by which to break the periods down. Instead, these dates define the rough edges of each period.

The first era, the birth of the political news industry, (Chart 3b) covers the time before political PR was conducted in any formal sense, from 1695 to about 1900 (1900 is only a rough date – falling between the Board of Trade journal being set up in 1886 and a tour of lecturers going out and speaking to people directly in 1912). This period embraces the development of journalists as political creatures and the activities they undertook to gather political news, despite the fierce penalties they could receive for doing so. It is an incredibly long period, spanning over 200 years but this was the amount of time it took until the development of the political PR industry began in earnest.

There was a formalisation of the political news industry, (Chart 3c) in the early 20th century. This, encompassing the time around World War One (from about 1900-1935), saw the beginning of formal, structured political PR. The Government started to give out official information but also began to realise the potential impact of political PR. This realisation led to an early antagonism between the news media and the government during the Great Strike over who controlled the news.

The period around and after World War Two (1935 – 1970) was characterised by a permanency in the political news industry (Chart 3d). This permanency was inspired by three significant developments. Firstly, the members of the Lobby became a permanent and accepted feature in Westminster. Secondly, press officers became permanent members of government departments. Thirdly, more formal structures were put in place for government liaison and intermediation with the news media. This formal permanency also pushed the political parties to consider how they may be able to use the news media to their advantage.

The next periodisation is characterised by the emergence of a market philosophy (1970-1988) which shaped the political news industry (Chart 3e) and seeped into attitudes towards political PR in the 1970s and 1980s. Journalists working in news organisations were feeling this just as the government were incorporating these values into many of their activities and structures. The structure of the COI was changed and external PR experts were hired by government and the Conservative party to advise on how to use the news media to their advantage. The market philosophy characterisation even filtered through to the political journalism side with rebellions in the Lobby occurring, highlighting the coming of age of competition.

This competitiveness was something that went much further in the final era (1988-2005), an era ideally labelled convolution within the political news industry (Chart 3f). This period characterises a massive change in the role of political PR and journalism with five major developments being seen. The way that communications has now been established as an integral element of political party structures, the further changes to the lobby system, the professionalisation and centralisation of government political PR structures and staff and the media focused role of special advisors all now characterising the political news industry. Many of these changes can be attributed to the growth and development of globalisation, with governments and parties seeing successful tactics used in other countries and learning to adopt them.

These all indicate that the political news industry has moved a long way in the last 100 years. It is tempting to classify this area, as has been done by others, as an era of 'professionalisation' within communications. This classification however would be entirely in contradiction with the points made by James Carey (1974) when he discussed how the perception in journalism history is always that we have reached some level of completeness. Whilst there are now levels of professionalisation in the political news industry, it should not be asserted that this professionalisation is necessarily an improvement, or that the political news industry has reached an advanced level of sophistication.

3.3 Birth of political news industry (1695 – 1900)

The abolition of pre-publication censorship in 1695 led to the first newspapers being set up, with the very first being *The Daily Courant*, in 1702 (Hargreaves, 2003: 37). Despite only having a circulation of 800 a day (Marr, 2004: 8), it had a wide audience as newspapers were typically kept in coffee shops and read out loud (as few were literate). Whilst it would be imagined that politics would have been a staple subject for these early newspapers, Parliament actually sat in secret and publishing speeches, known as 'taking notice of the proceedings in the House,' was a punishable offence. Instead, the early papers comprised mainly items taken from official publications from around Europe (Harrison, 2006: 48).

Gathering political news was difficult at this time. To be able to find out and report what was being said, journalists had to work out sneaky ways to get into the public gallery and listen in, trying to remember as much as they could to write about afterwards.² When these types of actions got too much for MPs they passed a motion declaring it "a high indignity to, and a notorious breach of the privilege of, this House for any news-writer" to allow its proceedings to appear in

² For more on history on the early press see: Curran & Seaton (2003), Marr (2004) and Harrison (2006).

print, on pain of punishment of "the utmost severity".³ MPs were said to be terrified that reporting would raise calls for accountability and they were not keen for the power to shift from themselves to the electors.

Journalists did continue to publish reports however, using nicknames in an attempt to disguise who they were discussing. As the number of newspapers increased⁴ MPs apparently got more upset by the thinly veiled references to themselves in the press and, by 1771, were ordering printers to apologise and to be reprimanded. When some refused, there were confrontations, leading to riots and the ultimate imprisonment of several MPs. The result was that whilst the "breach of privilege" rule stayed, the Commons gave up punishing those who reproduced its proceedings. They did not go so far as to give reporters a status in the house however, forcing them to compete for seats in the public gallery⁵.

The government did seem to have started to notice the news media at this time with a Treasury official in 1809 writing a Christmas appeal to the Departments of the Admiralty, Foreign Affairs and War. It said "as long as the Newspapers shall continue to be considered as important, some person in each of the three departments ought to read the principal Newspapers every morning and send to the Treasury...either a correct statement of the Fact, if Facts are to be stated, or a Hint of the Line which it wished should be taken" (Rawnsley, 2003b). This started a long, and still held, activity of departments monitoring the media.

Back in parliament however, the status quo in respect of MPs ignoring the 'breach of privilege' rule lasted for almost 100 years. During this time the first news agency, Reuters was set up (1851) followed 35 years later (1886) by the Press Association. Alongside this the press began to take on a sense of purpose and responsibility. An example of this was *The Times* in 1852 stating its role as:

To obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation. The journalists job, like the historian's was to seek out the truth, above all things, and to present to his readers not such things as stagecraft would wish them to know, but the truth as near as he can obtain it (Williams, 1998).

A further significant change was the abolition of stamp duty, known as the 'tax on knowledge' in 1853. This allowed commercial newspapers featuring advertising to be set up. As a response, the

³ Press Gallery – <http://www.thepressgallery.org.uk>

⁴ A paper existed in most major towns in England by the 1950s (Marr, 2004: 11).

⁵ Press Gallery.

price of papers halved in the 1850s and then halved again in the next ten years (Curran & Seaton, 2003: 30).

Another important development in this period, and the one which has a most significant influence on this thesis, was the creation of the Lobby Correspondents. Whilst the exact date at which this occurred is disputed⁶ it was thought to be in the 1880s. Their creation came about when the Speaker in the House of Commons, Speaker Denison, stopped members of the public from wandering into the Lobby to “inconvenience” MPs. He agreed instead to allow a select group of journalists access to MPs by placing their names on a registered list to be kept by the Serjeant at Arms. These journalists were allowed to loiter in the Members’ Lobby to button-hole MPs, giving birth to the term ‘lobby correspondent’⁷. The Serjeant at Arms’ list became known as the ‘Lobby list’ and two journalists from each major newspaper were allowed to be on it (Tunstall, 1970: 6). The formalisation of the Lobby list indicated a change in the acceptance of journalists in the Commons and highlighted how there were now three different types of political journalists. Firstly, the ‘Reporter of the Debates’, reporting the proceedings of parliament, then the ‘Sketch writers’, summarising debate in light hearted or partisan way and finally ‘Lobby correspondents’ who specialised in behind the scenes reporting of parliament and government (Tunstall, 1970: 5).

Despite the ‘breach of privilege rule’ still being in place, the relationship between political journalists and politicians at this time (around 1870) was not entirely antagonistic and conflictual. This was a sign of the relationships between the press and journalists maturing and politicians began to realise that having the ear of an editor was a way to get their views across. It was said that one, Lord Rosebery, “had a stable of journalists whom he kept nearly as well groomed as his stable of horses” (Marr, 2004: 23) and Gladstone’s administration in the 1880s was known for leakages and ‘constant intercourse’ between ministers and journalists (Cockerell, 1984: 32). This relationship building continued when some journalists began entering the Commons as MPs.

3.4 Formalisation of the political news industry (1900-1935)

Developments in the role of the Lobby in this period are difficult to place historically as so many documents were lost during the 1941 bombing but two elements stand out highlighting that there was a formalisation of the political news industry. Politicians began to understand the importance of news media and the commercialisation of official information a formal political news industry was created. In fact, the Government perhaps understood the importance of news more than journalists would have liked and the formalisation became a bit too formal as, during the First

⁶ It is thought to be around 1885 (Tunstall, 1970: 6) but the precise date is unlikely to ever be clarified as the bombing of the House of Commons in 1941 meant that all records were destroyed.

⁷ Press Gallery.

World War and then the General Strike, Government placed new pressures on political journalists to give out official lines.

3.4.1 Politicians begin to comprehend the importance of news media

The first significant political PR advancement took place when the First World War started in 1914. There was a commercialisation of official information (Cockerell, 1984: 18) as the Government invited the editors of the major newspapers to sit on its Information Advisory Committee (IAC) on the war. Press Officers also began to be employed by government departments, in particular the War Propaganda Bureau in 1914 and a Home Office Information Bureau in 1916 (Cockerell, 1984: 19). Politicians had begun to realise the power of the media to spread news and followed the IAC with a Ministry of Information in 1918.

Lloyd George (1916-22) gave honours to the press barons he came into contact with – not because he wanted positive publicity but because he understood the power they held (Ingham, 2003: 85). This early understanding of the power that could be manipulated within the media showed some of the first, formal ideas of an active political news industry. This was not fully fledged however as other Prime Ministers, in particular Baldwin (1923-37) never courted Fleet Street and instead treated those press barons who challenged him with nothing but contempt (Ingham, 2003: 85-6). Ramsey McDonald (1924 and 1929-35) however is a special case in this era for he was not only at home in the political news industry but built up strong relationships with journalists and instigated the first press secretary and ad hoc briefings for journalists (Ingham, 2003: 86).

3.4.2 Politics and Journalism collide – creating a formal political news industry

The use of PR by the UK government has tended to follow particular crisis (Miller & Dinan, 2000: 7) and the General Strike was no exception. The strike, in 1926, appears to have been a catalyst for lobby journalism. It went from being a journalist led system, enabling political journalists to gather news, into a government led system through which Government information could be channelled. It was during the General Strike that members of the Cabinet began to hold private and unattributable daily briefings with selected journalists. This led to the situation by 1930 where Ramsay McDonald presided over a much more elaborate, but still as private, system to favour the 45 Lobby Correspondents as much as the politicians. Not only was the information given unattributable and private, but even the existence of the system itself was kept a secret. These collective briefings took place at 10 Downing Street and took the title 'Lobby briefings.'

The importance of the press to government grew and in 1932 the first Chief Press Secretary was appointed to 10 Downing Street.⁸ The development of political PR continued and was led by the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who was thought to be a proactive media prime minister who spent a lot of time cultivating the press.⁹

It has been noted that MPs' attitudes towards Lobby journalists had changed significantly by the end of this period with one member of the Lobby comparing the 1890s with the 1930s:

"Then one had to walk warily and calculate the chances of a rebuff in approaching a minister or member for the first time; now, information is asked for and expected almost as a right, and even ministers are canvassed for news with a freedom that forty years ago would have been resented" (Higginbottom, 1934: 149).

This matches the image of the more proactive attitudes of MPs, the acceptance of journalists by MPs and the understanding by MPs of how journalists could be used for their own purposes.

A collision in the political news industry occurred after the development of a new potential medium for news radio. With the Wireless Telegraphy Act in 1904 and then the setting up of the British Broadcasting Corporation (in 1926) as a monopoly there the Great Strike provided the very first test of BBC impartiality. The BBC had not broadcast news before 1926. News was seen to be purely the role of the press. With the strikes preventing newspaper production, the BBC stepped into fill their role and developed a news service of its own. As one of the only forms of communication, Churchill wanted to commandeer the BBC to push forward the government's messages. John Reith, head of the BBC at the time, stood his ground and refused, stating that the BBC should be highly autonomous and independent. Churchill gave in and used the formal government mouthpiece, the *British Gazette*, to get their messages out instead. The BBC remained neutral, reporting statements from both government and the strikers and has attempted to continue this position to this day (Curran and Seaton, 2003: 117-9).

One of first examples of government using the political PR tactic of avoiding the news media also took place in this period. In 1912, the Government hired lecturers to travel around the country explaining to the masses how the new national insurance scheme would work. This effectively saw them boycotting the political correspondents who could have distorted the messages the government wanted to give out in order to convey a 'pure' message.

⁸ Press Gallery.

⁹ <http://www.comms.gov.uk/about/history/default.htm> / <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A3407483> (as viewed on 31/12/06).

3.5 Permanency in the political news industry (1935 – 1970)

There were three main changes in the relationships between political PRs and journalists in this era. Firstly, the Lobby became accepted as a permanent feature in parliamentary life. Secondly, press officers became commonplace in Westminster. Finally, more formal structures were put in place for government to deal with the news media. Not everything was permanent however and the role of political party PRs was often disorganised, conducted locally and usually in an ad-hoc manner.

3.5.1. Political journalists accepted as permanent feature in parliamentary life

The Lobby came into their own in this period with a general acceptance that they were part of the Parliamentary estate, both physically and psychologically. They were, it could be said, part of the parliamentary furniture. Two events around the Second World War highlighted this. Firstly, when plans were made during the war for parliament to be set up away from London, if the need arose, the Lobby journalists were included on this plan. Then, after some of the House of Commons was destroyed by bombing in 1941, the journalists who worked there were actually asked for their views on reconstruction. They requested more seats, more office space, better telephones and even a smarter entrance! They received all they asked for, and more. The new chamber, opened in 1950, had better acoustics and MPs had agreed to introduce microphones linked to speakers in the gallery so that journalists would no longer have to strain to hear debates properly. A further outcome of the building works was that there was more room for journalists to be housed in the Commons and so the Lobby list could be expanded to include provincial evening newspapers (in 1950), again to include deputies and then again, (in 1961) after a campaign by the *Sunday Telegraph*, to include the National Sunday Newspapers (Tunstall, 1970: 6). Broadcast News journalists also came to take up more prominence and some of the previous deferential approach of the BBC politicians began to be challenged in the light of the new ITN (Harrison, 2006: 66).

This era of inclusion was not without limits however and a suggestion in 1949 that foreign correspondents should be admitted to lobby briefings was dismissed as against the national interest. The suggestion that government policy should be set out in open press conferences was also dismissed for a similar reason.¹⁰

Two other events took place which cemented political journalists in Parliamentary life at this time. The first was that the Lobby briefings, which had been going since 1930, were placed by the Prime Minister Clement Attlee, on a daily and more formalised basis in 1945. The second was,

¹⁰ More on the Lobby can be found in Seymore Ure (1968).

partly in response to the Dalton Budget leak in 1947, that in the early 1950s¹¹ Lobby rules were defined and codified. This code was designed to guarantee secrecy and ensure that systems were followed. The rules were not formally published however and remained secret with an almost mythological status until Tunstall printed the 1956 version in 1970.¹² The secrecy, alongside the fact that all reporting was still technically illegal, pressurised journalists into working with some caution and deference (Tunstall, 1970: 49).

3.5.2 Press officers accepted as permanent feature in Departmental life

The acceptance of political journalists becoming a permanent feature in Westminster led to the growth of another group: Press Officers. They were needed to deal with these prominent and persistent journalists. A Press Secretary had been established in Number 10 in 1932 and in 1939 the Ministry of Information was recreated, having been disbanded after the First World War. It has been said that the Ministry of Information was thought to be staffed by “brilliant but dotty amateurs” with, in 1940, only 47 out of 999 staff being former journalists (Curran & Seaton, 2003: 140). The Ministry grew extremely quickly though and by 1944, press officers became a common feature across Westminster and Whitehall with over 7,600 working in the Ministry of Information and a further 1700 working directly in departments.¹³ Eventually the press officers began to expand their remit to provide information in more proactive ‘press relations’ activities.

3.5.3 Structures set in place for government political PR

As government press officers became more commonplace in the 1940s, structures were needed to be set in place for them to work. When Reith was appointed Head of the Ministry of Information in 1940, he said he was depressed by its “pointlessness and organisation” (Curran & Seaton, 2003: 140). In response, in 1946, the Central Office of Information (COI) was introduced and in 1949 the Government Information Service (GIS) was set up.

The COI, a non-ministerial department, took over many of the responsibilities which had previously come under the remit of the Ministry of Information. It was concerned with overseas publicity, cultural, educational and trade operations and worked to promote government initiatives. This included informing the public about their rights and entitlements, providing guidance about government initiatives, programmes and current regulations, influencing behaviour, informing citizens about current government policies and informing people overseas about Britain. Any government department wanting to run publicity campaigns used the COI,

¹¹ No exact date can be found but a revised version from 1956 is available.

¹² These can be read in Tunstall (1970: 124-128).

¹³ <http://www.comms.gov.uk/about/history/default.htm> (as viewed on 1/1/06).

which was engineered to hold all the necessary expertise and experience. The organisation was funded from central funds (known as the Allied Vote) and had the advantage of aggregating all government spending to get heavy discounts on supplies. It worked on a campaigning basis whilst the GIS was more press based. It was set up after the Crombie Report which reviewed the way departments conducted their information work. The report also proposed the creation of the Information Officer class. This was set up in August 1949.

3.5.4 Parties begin to acknowledge political PR

Political PR by the political parties was barely in existence until this period. Any forms of media communications by the parties were characterised by a partisan press being fed information by a loose organizational network of grassroots party volunteers in local constituencies. Election campaigns were not much better co-ordinated and were usually short, ad-hoc, national campaigns run by the party leader and a few of their close advisers (Norris, 2000: 141). This type of campaigning had utilised newspapers rather than electronic forms of communication (despite the introduction of radio in the 1920s) and didn't change until the first television coverage of a British general election in 1959.¹⁴

As the centrality of election news communications moved from newspapers to television so it was mirrored by a development of the content coming not from the constituency grassroots but from the party leadership and from amateurs towards professionals (Norris, 2000:146). The television campaign was strongly controlled by the public service legal framework under which broadcasters were required to maintain 'party balance' and impartiality in news coverage and to provide an agreed allocation of unpaid airtime to party political broadcasts. Television centralised the campaign dramatically increasing the influence of flagship news programmes and making it necessary for party communication staff to learn how to work with this new medium and how to make it work for their party leaders.

3.5.5 Example of research from the period: Tunstall, J. *The Lobby Correspondents*, 1970

Until the 1970s, the role of the Lobby Correspondents was secret and often took on a mythical status. Their privileges, relationships and even day-to-day activities were not discussed and when they used information given to them it was often only to be used without attribution. At the end of the 1960s, Tunstall attempted to open up this secretive area by interviewing 39 Lobby Correspondents. He asked them to describe themselves, and exactly what their role involved. The

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion see Norris, 1997

resulting study gave a colourful insight into the political journalist in 1970. It also touches on the role of the political sources, despite the scarcity of formal political PRs at the time.

At the time of Tunstall's research there were 109 members of the Lobby, often working in teams (especially national journalists) of two or three. The typical Lobby journalist was male (only 2 out of 109 were female) with an average age of 42, having worked in the lobby for 8 years. Typically, they had left school at 17, had not gone to university and came from a middle and lower middle class background (Tunstall, 1970: 33-4). They had a very strong interest in politics before entering the Lobby and tended to have moderate and centrist views (Tunstall, 1970: 35). The median number of hours worked each week was 53 (less in recess or when the PM was out of London) and they complained about the intensity of their job, having to be constantly switched on to politics, reading, listening and engaging all the time. By the standards of other specialists they were fairly well paid and most lived on the edge of London rather than centrally (Tunstall, 1970: 33-42). They would work from a small office in Parliament which was cramped, squalid, overcrowded with a lack of privacy and a lack of research assistance or secretarial help (Tunstall, 1970: 27).

The Lobby journalists did have a major advantage over other political journalists (such as the sketch writers or debate reporters) though. It was access. They had access to the Commons Lobby to be able to speak to MPs face to face, they received early copies of documents and reports and they had access to the twice daily Lobby briefings (Tunstall, 1970: 4). Their main interaction with politicians (rarely political PRs) was through briefings. They, on average, attended about 25 briefings a month split between not for use (1), not for attribution (21), on the record (1) and a mixture (2). The main types of briefings attended were:

- Twice daily briefings by the Prime Ministers press staff
- Regular briefings by cabinet minister on specific days of the week
- Irregular briefings by other senior politicians
- Briefings from backbench MPs on an ad hoc basis

Outside those briefings held by the Prime Minister's Press Staff, Lobby Correspondents interviewed did not seem to attend briefings from non-elected political staff.

The political sources the Lobby Correspondents discussed were the Prime Minister's press officers, Cabinet Ministers, occasional Backbench MPs, and more occasionally, other political journalists. Whilst he mentions 'sources' quite a lot there is no mention of the type of sources that would be expected today; Special Advisors, Heads of Communication, Departmental Press Officers or even Party Communications Staff. When he discusses the problems of generalisation verses specialisation he states that "There is a danger that all three groups – politicians, senior

civil servants and journalists – are incapable of understanding the issues which they are expected to shape” (Tunstall, 1970: 25). There is no mention of anyone who would now be expected to be the interface between those groups. Civil Servant PROs (Public Relations Officers) were discussed but only briefly (Tunstall, 1970: 59-63) and in relation to fact checking rather than information negotiation. The only PROs regularly listened to and liaised with were those working in 10 Downing Street.

Tunstall was one of the first to publish the Lobby Rules (Tunstall, 1970: 124-6) which had always been kept secret before. The rules were neither legally binding nor formal but they were, in the main, adhered to. However, like so much else in this area, there was secrecy and stealth involved. Much was hinted at rather than said outright, subterfuge took place so rules would not be seen to be blatantly broken and anything that was said, was said tangentially (Tunstall, 1970: 19).

Tunstall discusses the occupational norms on each side as the exchange of information for publicity takes place. He stresses that on the side of the journalist are occupational norms defending the anonymity of sources, the importance of mutual trust and an expectation that sources are motivated by self-interest. On the side of the political sources there are norms accepting that journalists are potentially helpful as well as dangerous, yet that the publicity can be a significant political resource (Tunstall, 1970: 43). The transaction between the two sides was described by some as a market place. They were asked who helped who out more. Just over half said it was about equal, just under half said the sources help the journalists more and only one journalist said they felt they helped the sources more.

The political journalists who were interviewed talked about the sanctions received from politicians but none of them ‘often’ received sanctions and apart from letters of correction or complaint sent to their editor, any other forms of sanction were rare (Tunstall, 1970: 45). They saw their demeanour when pursuing major news sources as cautious rather than deferent (Tunstall, 1970: 46). When asked about tension in dealing with sources and contacts, half (50%) said they felt no tension, a third (37%) said they felt a little and about 15% said they felt a certain amount. No-one felt there was lots of tension. The political journalists in Tunstall’s research were working within relatively secretive structures, working with, in the main, sources who were politicians or Number 10 press officers. They felt they got more from the sources than they gave back to them and most importantly, they felt they were in control of the relationship.

Tunstall also found some significant factors in the way that political sources and journalists worked with each other. Co-operation seemed to depend on the following six elements:

- The news organisation for which they worked
- The frequency of publication

- The position of the journalist within their team
- The personality of the individual journalist
- The matching of ages between source and journalist
- Previous employment

When asked about relations with civil servants, a third of political journalists said they have less than a fifth of their dealings with them, under a third said 21-40% and the other third said 41-60%. In about half of cases, when a political journalist wanted to speak to a source organisation with PR staff, they did speak to the PR person first (Tunstall, 1970: 60). PROs were seen as being helpful to fill in minor detail but on touchy or vital stories they would avoid them (Tunstall, 1970: 60). Tunstall concluded that civil servants are seen by journalists as “excessively cautious, secretive and unhelpful” (Tunstall, 1970: 61) but also that they are just unlikely to know much information which would be of interest to Lobby correspondents.

Tunstall’s research is important as it provides a very clear, snapshot of an industry, and all those working in it, at a time when the political news industry was stamping authority. At the time of Tunstall’s research, the industry had become established and gained an air of permanency. Soon after his research was conducted, the industry moved into a more market led philosophy which had a impact upon the journalists working within it and the atmosphere in which they worked.

3.6 Market philosophy shapes the political news industry (1970 - 1988)

In the 1970s and 80s, a feeling of a market philosophy grew throughout the political news sector. This occurred for both journalists who were working in competitive news organisations, and for political PRs inside government departments who had to build business cases for their survival. This infusion of a market philosophy was matched by an understanding within government, and across the parties, that communications and specific tools and systems of communications would be very valuable. This period also saw the introduction of the term ‘spin doctor,’ coming from US baseball terminology; ‘spin’ coming from the movement of the ball and ‘spin doctor’ referring to the coach who corrected a player’s technique. The term first appeared in the American political world in the mid-1980s before coming over to the UK to describe someone whose job was to embellish a straightforward piece of news with the particular spin required by this or that political camp (Brunson, 2000: 280).

Four other very obvious developments occurred in this period and all focused on the ability of the market to impact upon the political news industry: (1) the change in structure of the COI, (2) the

growth of PR expertise in the civil service, (3) the rebellion of some members of the Lobby and (4) parties finally learning the importance of the media in determining electoral success.

3.6.1 COI put on more professional and accountable footing

In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's government was striving to streamline national services. They sought to cut down on the number of government organisations, introduce competition and privatise many national providers. The COI escaped privatisation but, in return, it had to effectively become an agency for government departments. Departments would be given communication funds directly and the COI were there to advise them on how best to use them; be it to build and grow in-house departmental specialists in press, PR and marketing or whether to use the COI to get them the most value for money from the private sector. Structurally, the COI became a trading fund and its status changed to that of an Executive Agency. Financially, it was expected to break even and organisationally, the chief executive was to report to - and meet targets set by - the Cabinet Office minister.

3.6.2 PR expertise grows in civil service and government agencies

The 'Market Philosophy' period can be recognised by the huge growth in PR advice being given to the civil service and government agencies. Financial and Public Affairs consultants became common in the sector and established a strong and influential role for themselves in politics. No longer a 'nice to have', political PR became a necessity.

Miller and Dinan (2000: 5-35) have researched the rise of the PR industry in Britain and concluded that its massive growth in this period can be ascribed to the 'tilt to the market' under Thatcher. This tilt, they claim, is due to the privatisation and deregulation activities of this period. They argue that market philosophy seeped into political and economic life in the 1980s and that PR techniques were an important means by which the changes were accomplished (Miller & Dinan, 2000: 6). PR was used extensively in this period in order to:

- Lobby and prepare for deregulation
- Re-ignite businesses post deregulation
- Prepare the public for privatisation
- Introduce the public to newly privatised companies (Miller & Dinan, 2000: 13).

In order to do this, PR skills became highly desirable in government and many of these skills had to be bought in from outside agencies. Former national agencies expanded their PR departments significantly with BT growing their communications team by 66% and British Gas increasing theirs by 200% (Miller and Dinan, 2000: 18).

3.6.3 Rebellion in the lobby

Back inside the Commons, in 1986, the new *Independent* newspaper announced that its political reporters would not be applying to join the Lobby list. Briefings at this point were still so secret that no-one was allowed to admit the existence of them and the *Independent* said they did not want to be part of the secrecy and mythology of the lobby processes. They said they wanted to set a higher moral standard and would not use these undemocratic systems to investigate news. It is said they were particularly incensed that Bernard Ingham (Thatcher's Press Secretary) had abused his position by slighting Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet critics. Once their boycott was announced the *Guardian* and the *Scotsman* followed suit and resigned their places. They were still able to find out information however as other reporters, who were still on the lobby list, passed on briefing information to those excluded journalists. Eventually it was Gus O'Donnell, then John Major's spokesman, who ended some Lobby secrecy by agreeing to allow lobby briefings to be attributed to "Downing Street sources." In response the *Independent* joined the Lobby list.¹⁵

A further change in the Lobby at this time was that the three specific divisions of journalists, which had been so separate at the beginning of the century, fell apart. The role of the Debate journalist (to report on debates) changed significantly, as newspapers scraped their debate pages. Sketch writers gained passes to the Lobby and it became the norm to have a team of political journalists, working inside parliament (both gallery and Lobby) and across Whitehall.

3.6.4 Acceptance of communications in parties

At the beginning of this period, methods of external communication for the political parties were un-coordinated, usually localised and ad-hoc. They became more important around elections and faded into the background in the time between. Around this time it was noted that, to be effective in elections, a more co-ordinated, longer-term outlook was necessary with regards to the news media.¹⁶ The Conservative party in particular bought in professional communications specialists with three in particular becoming very influential; Maurice Saatchi, Tim Bell and Gordon Reece. There were very much advisors though – the actual campaigning was still run by politicians. However, one thing they were successful at was a more professional political PR stance. They moved the focus from unpaid volunteers in the localities, towards the central party leadership using communication professionals.¹⁷

¹⁵ http://www.thepressgallery.org.uk/page.php?domain_name=thepressgallery.org.uk&viewpage=lobby%20rules%3F (as viewed on 1/1/06).

¹⁶ For a discussion of election broadcasting see Blumler & Gurevitch (1995).

¹⁷ For accounts of these developments up until the 1992 election see Kavanagh (1995) and Scammell (1995.)

The Labour Party were slower to understand this communications side. Their election loss in 1983 was perhaps the event which kick started that party's first acknowledgement of the importance of communications and political PR. Labour's defeat by a Conservative party which was strong in both ideology and leadership was even further exaggerated in the light that the Tories had been taking lessons on PR and marketing and studying the media. All the parties were seeing the fading of defined partisan allegiances and realising that there was a growing consumerist attitude by voters towards their votes. The recognition of what they were up against, led the Labour party, under Neil Kinnock, to analyse their policies and processes and to modernise their tactics (for more see Shaw 1994; Hughes & Wintour 1990; Heffernan & Marqusee 1992). The Labour leadership realised, for them to achieve electoral success, they needed to learn the techniques the Conservatives had been using to make the party 'journalist friendly' and 'media savvy'. This was facilitated by people like Peter Mandelson, who became Director of Campaigns and Communications and masterminded the slightly more successful 1987 election campaign. This campaign was run with a more positive communications attitude inside the party and began the slow process of putting the Labour party on a more equal footing with the Conservatives.

3.6.5 Example of research from the period: Cockerell et al, *Sources Close to the Prime Minister*, 1984

In 1984, the political documentary maker Michael Cockerell, worked with two academic media researchers, Peter Hennessy and David Walker to publish views into the way that the government attempts to control the news in the UK. They gave a damning report calling the Lobby correspondents an: "organised group with their own rituals". They said much of their work is secret, unknown to their colleagues and often even kept from senior editors (Cockerell et al, 1984: 9). They damningly describe the Lobby Correspondents as a cartel, the "primary conduit for the release by governments of official information, enabling the wheels of Whitehall's news machine to revolve" (Cockerell, 1984: 10).

Their descriptions of the political news industry showed how political PRs have come into their own, working with strong strategies and sophisticated tactics to manipulate the news media into managing the news, in "suppressing the bad and polishing the image of the Prime Minister" (Cockerell, 1984: 7). Cockerell, Walker and Hennessy detail a situation where political PRs have become so successful that there is "often an active collaboration of the press and broadcasters (Cockerell, 1984: 9). A collaboration which can affect the media coverage dramatically as often newspapers and radio and television news are tainted by official information." They state that "too often the official managers of the political news have been allowed to dictate the agenda" (Cockerell, 1984: 11).

Cockerell, Hennessy and Walker describe the relationship between the two main players in the political news industry as one of husband and wife, quoting at length Lord Hill's description of the husband (the government) being older, slower and heavier than his wife (the press) who is livelier, shrewder, more perceptive and addicted to gossip (Cockerell, 1984: 40). They also discuss many of the tactics used on both sides (Cockerell, 1984: 115-125) covering the way announcements are timed to catch certain editions, priorities put on 'photo opportunities' and the ways that stories are planted or leaked. Specifically they highlight how a prime minister in this era (Margaret Thatcher) would draw up an enemies list which would consist of interviewers considered too hostile and she would refuse to be interviewed by anyone on this list. She also learnt how to adapt her image to make a better impact through the media (Cockerell, 1984: 192). This shows a fractured relationship between the political PRs and journalists with political PRs being much more strategic in their thinking than ever before.

Their research concludes that news management is "an inescapable part of politics" and that it can 'distort the truth'. This is a damning conclusion and one which they suggest a manifesto to fix. Calling for an abolition of the Lobby they propose an attempt by journalists to match civil servants with their "guile, forensic skill and intellectual horsepower" (Cockerell, 1984: 235) to properly investigate the government and civil service. He said this would prevent journalists becoming accomplices in concealment or adjuncts to media campaigns by politicians (Cockerell, 1984: 248). Similar calls have been made since this period. Whilst some changes have taken place (as we will shortly see) and political journalists do seem to be standing up for themselves more firmly, the manifesto recommended by Cockerell, Walker and Hennessy has not been implemented.

3.7 Convolution within the political news industry (1988 - 2005)

The period since 1988 has seen a massive change in the role of political PR and journalism. A comparison with the 1970s and 1980s is just about possible, go back any further and it seems like a whole different industry. There have been five developments which seem to have contributed towards this situation. Firstly, there is the way that communications has now been established as an integral element of political party structures. Secondly, there were further changes to the Lobby system which saw more transparency bought in and more journalists entitled to hear briefings. Thirdly there was a professionalisation and fourthly a centralisation of government political PR structures and staff. Finally, the role of special advisors was, unofficially, developed so that they often conduct more of a media relations role.

3.7.1 Communications established as integral element of party culture

The first major change in this period was the acceptance that media communications are not just helpful to political parties but essential. As a result, communications has become a key element of all political party structures. Parties now operate in a mediatised promotional culture where there has become a constant, consuming and obsessive compulsion to shape the news agenda and project a positive image (Wernick, 1991). Communication efforts are no longer concentrated on the short periods before election campaigns. The age of the permanent campaign (Norris, 1997) appears to have been fully embraced. This permanent campaign is, Norris says, an attempt by the parties to reassert control through strategic communications and media management. Long term continuous preparation means that press officers in 1997 mainly needed to work in a 'play-safe reactive mode' controlling against any unexpected crisis (Norris, 1997). Now all the political parties have learnt how to 'design,' (Scammell, 1995) 'package' (Franklin, 1994) and 'market' (Kavanagh, 1995) politics.

As discussed earlier (see section 3.6.4), in the 1980s, any divisions within the Labour party were not just reported but exploited by journalists working for pro-Conservative newspapers. Divisions within the Labour Party were shown as evidence of a party unable to govern or even unite. In an attempt to build a relationship with the media, Labour focused on courting national newspapers (Tunstall, 1996) to bring them over to the New Labour cause. Whilst previous eras had seen the Conservatives having strong, stable and traditional links with the press, in this era, these links crumbled. Thatcher,¹⁸ in the 1980s could safely rely upon a sympathetic press.¹⁹ During the 1990s, the Labour party worked hard to gain the trust and understanding of the traditionally Conservative press and in 1997 many papers changed their partisanship (McNair 2000: 146-155) with six out of ten national dailies, and five out of nine Sundays, endorsing the Labour party (Norris et al, 1999). This dealignment however has increased the complexity and uncertainty of media management for parties who now have no guarantees on sympathetic sources.²⁰

Unlike the localised press relations of the past, the 1997 election saw Labour learn the tactics which had in the past been used by their opposition – and not just during the election, they used them all the time. Professional media management strategies were (and still are) used in the party for routine politics,²¹ and their strategy was to look long term. They professionalised their own central press teams and then focused on local constituency staff and the strategic targeting of key voters. News techniques previously implemented only during campaigns are now used by political

¹⁸ For an insider account of government-press relations in these years see Ingham (1994).

¹⁹ With papers with a circulation of about 8.7 million being leaning towards the Conservative compared with only 3.3 million leaning towards Labour.

²⁰ See Swanson and Mancini, *Op Cit*, p15.

²¹ See, for example, Jones (1995).

PRs in the parties on a daily basis with central control and an ideal of remaining on-message. Labour were conducting media relations in a way they had never considered before, with meticulous preparation, constant rebuttal and a long term campaign which had lasted five years, not the usual six weeks before the election (Crewe et al, 1998; Butler & Kavanagh, 1999).

3.7.2 Further changes to the Lobby system

In 2000, Alastair Campbell, Tony's Blair's Head of Communications, responded to allegations of excess spin by opening up the Lobby briefing process. One of his first changes was to allow journalists to attribute briefings to "the Prime Minister's official spokesman." This was to give the idea that the system was more transparent and less secretive. In 2002, he went even further, opening up briefings to specialist and foreign journalists.

The 2004 Phillis Inquiry²² looked at a number of areas including a consideration of the ways that government communicated with Lobby Correspondents. The review stated that the Lobby system was lacking in credibility as it gave the impression that journalists and the government were involved in a private and secretive insider process. Journalists complained to the inquiry that public information, which should be available to all, was being used as a currency to influence the news media. The committee called for the government communications system to be policed by Whitehall to ensure professionalism and impartiality alongside a totally open lobby system. This system would involve TV cameras covering briefings, ministers appearing at the televised briefings to announce policy and civil servants giving on-the-record briefings on policy. Much of this has now happened.

Journalists did not get off scott-free however as the inquiry also called for the media to reflect on its conduct, including correcting its mistakes, verifying and attributing quotes, and making "a clearer separation of facts from news, comment, and entertainment" (Phillis Report, 2003: 28).

3.7.3 Centralisation of Political PR

A strong development in this period was the centralisation of government communications. It was not a completely new trend however as the level of centralisation, it seems, tends to depend very heavily on which Prime Minister is in power.

²² The inquiry was called in the wake of the controversy over Jo Moore, the adviser who suggested 11 September was a good day to "bury" bad news. It was led by Bob Phillis, head of the Guardian Media Group. For more see Section 6.6.

As soon as Labour came into power in May 1997 they set to work integrating the successful techniques they had learnt whilst in opposition. Their first Ministerial Code²³ (in July 1997) made it clear that the Chief Press Secretary and the No 10 Press Office had the authority to take a co-ordinating and leadership role. It said that to ensure the effective presentation of Government policy, all major interviews and media appearances, both print and broadcast, should be agreed with the No 10 Press Office and the policy content of all major speeches, press releases and new policy initiatives was to be cleared with the No 10 Private Office. Each Department was also told that they should keep a record of media contacts by both Ministers and officials.

Slightly later in 1997, the Mountfield review²⁴ was set up and one of its aims was to consider the strategic co-ordination of policy and its communication across Government. It decided that:

“The overall political strategy, direction and style of the Government is set by the Prime Minister. He looks to the Chief Press Secretary and the No 10 Press Office to ensure that the essential messages and key themes, which underpin the Government’s strategy, are sustained and not lost in the clamour of events. This means giving a clear direction from the centre” (Mountfield Report, 1997: 7).

A monetary indication of this centralisation can be seen by the rising costs of the Downing Street press office which more than doubled in the six years following 1997, when Tony Blair won the election. When former Conservative Prime Minister John Major was in No 10 in 1996-7 the cost of running the press office was just £597,240. By 2003, the figure had increase 130% to £1,375,894.²⁵

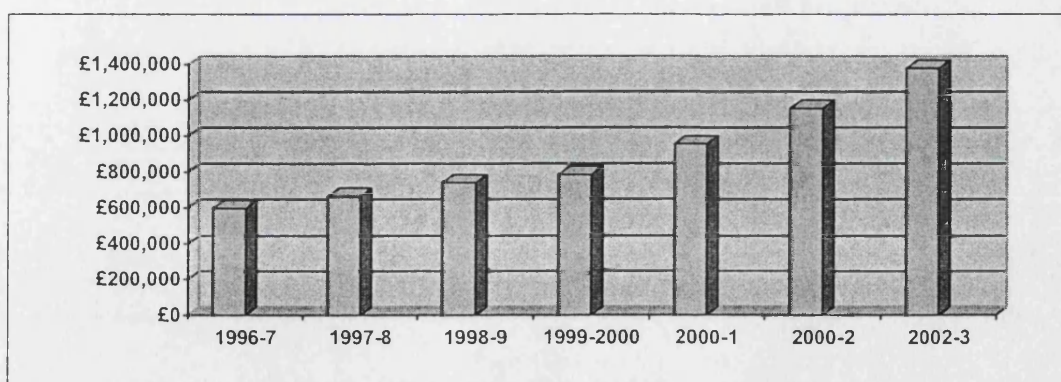


Chart 3g: Costs of running the No 10 press office. Source: Hansard: 23 March 2004

²³ Paragraph 88.

²⁴ <http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/gcreview/links/mountfield.pdf>

²⁵ Hansard – 23 March 2004

This centralisation has remained since 1997 and has actually only got stronger with a Permanent Secretary for Government Communications being introduced in 2004 after the Phillis review to co-ordinate communications strategy.

3.7.4 Professionalisation and modernisation of civil service communications

In 1997, when New Labour won the election, they were concerned by the low status of communications within government. They were specifically concerned by the lack of facilities and assistance for press officers. They had expected civil servants to be employing similar techniques to those of their party press officers and found the reality to be very different. The new government had seen their communications approach work and wanted to use similar tactics in every department. This was recognised by the Public Accounts Select Committee who, in August 1998,²⁶ stated that “while in opposition, the Labour party improved its techniques of presentation and news management. When it came into office it found government press offices which seemed, by comparison, unsophisticated and inefficient” (Public Accounts Select Committee, 1998: paragraph 1).

The new government in 1997 began the improvement process almost immediately by expanding the Policy Unit, creating a Strategic Communications Unit and a Research Information Unit in Number 10 and staffing them with a mixture of permanent civil servants and special advisers. Their view was that the main barrier to extending their changes to incorporate a more strategic media strategy was a lack of professional staff across the civil service. They wanted more specialist PRs with experience of communication in private industry. They began to achieve their aim by easing out several heads of information and replacing them with those who had private sector experience rather than civil service backgrounds (Jones, 2001: 79).

To address the issue of professional standards for civil service press officers, in September 1997, the government set up a review of the way that Governmental PR was conducted. They tasked Sir Robin Mountfield to “consider proposals to respond to concerns about how far the Government Information Service (GIS) is equipped in all areas to meet the demands of a fast-changing media world; to build on the skills and resources of the career GIS; and to maintain the established, and recently reconfirmed, propriety guidelines.” The review concluded that it was necessary for there to be:

- Higher standards in Government Press Offices

²⁶ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmpublicadm/770/77002.htm>

- Improved co-ordination both across Government and within departments
- Closer and better working relations between policy civil servants and press officers
- Better leadership, training, development and personnel management
- The retention of a politically impartial information service (Mountfield, 1997)

One immediate recommendation to help achieve these was a reorganisation of the GIS and its renaming to the Government Information and Communications Services (GICS). This occurred almost immediately.

A progress report on implementing Mountfield's recommendations was published in June 1998. It reported that the review had given impetus to improvements that the best had already begun putting in place. It did however report some concerns which included a "glass ceiling" for information staff and a distinct decline in job mobility. The report sought the "corporate commitment of all Heads of Information to staff training and career development." The report also recorded the view from No 10 as one which was mostly very positive, saying that the "the GICS has 'raised its game' and handling seems much smoother" (Mountfield, 1997: 3). They did however say that there were problems with certain departments, that advance warning was not as good as it should be and that too little strategic message was injected. The next progress report six months later (January 1999) stated there was "steady general improvement" across the recommendations but highlighted concerns over retention and high turnover.²⁷

Another major test for the profession was the relationship breakdown at the DTLR (Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions between the Special Advisor Jo Moore and the civil servant Head of Press, Martin Sixsmith in 2001 (see 6.6). The Public Accounts Select Committee published a report into the concerns concluding that there was a need "for a sustainable improvement in the quality of the service provided by the permanent civil servants in the GICS" (Select Committee on Public Administration, 2002)²⁸. They agreed that there had been improvements but that further events would strengthen the services and there needed to be "continued pressure to achieve and sustain high levels of performance" and that a wide-ranging, objective and external look at the quality of the GICS is necessary" and would be timely (Select Committee in Public Administration, 2002).²⁹

During this time (in 2002) the Government News Network (GNN), previously a section of the COI, moved to GICS. The GNN incorporated the press and publicity officers advising Government, working on the regional delivery of national campaigns and issuing government news releases and media information. It basically liaised on the Government's behalf with the

²⁷ www.gics.gov.uk/thegicstoday/introduction.htm (as viewed 01/12/06).

²⁸ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmpubadm/303/30302.htm> (as viewed 01/12/06).

²⁹ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmpubadm/303/30307.htm> (as viewed 01/12/06).

media and the public. Even with their briefing intelligence and monitoring role in crisis, this was not considered enough and so the review of the GICS, as called for by the Public Accounts committee, finally came in 2003. It came in the form of the Phillis committee (set up in the wake of the Moore case – see chapter six, section 6.6) who looked at all the civil service communications systems. Phillis' committee (Phillis report, 2003) concluded that the GICS was such an ineffective shambles that it was no longer fit for purpose. The committee called for the disbanding of the GICS and a replacement 'centre of excellence' communication service. Alongside this they also called for, and the government agreed to create, a permanent secretary post to take charge of communications, who would have both No 10's Whitehall press spokesmen and its politically-appointed press secretary to report directly into them. Finally, they asked for professional training for special advisers and press office staff. Phillis, after finishing his review told the Public Administration committee that the tight control of information post 1997 had "led to an intensification of the adversarial reaction from the media." His view was that the government had taken too narrow a view of communications, seeing communication simply as the press office and news management.³⁰ He wanted his recommendations implemented to improve this.

The Permanent Secretary position suggested by Phillis is now in place and controls the new Centre of Excellence: the Government Communications Network (GCN).³¹ The GCN is a network of 1,100 specialist communications staff who work across government (including No 10, the Cabinet Office, departments, agencies, non departmental public bodies and the devolved administrations) who are employees of their home department and usually work in their department's Communications Directorate. Despite belonging to a 'home department' they have a shared recruitment process, common career development lines and joint promotion opportunities which come through a single Development Centre. To improve the professionalism and raise standards for all communication staff, a set of professional standards are outlined in a 'Toolkit' (GICS Handbook, 2005) and all staff are taught the special guidance on propriety.³² GCN staff are expected to work outside their departmental boundaries when there is a need for it (i.e. national crisis) and they should all move easily between departments to develop their careers and knowledge. Finally they all have the opportunity to undertake training through the Civil Service College.

3.7.5 Prominence of special advisors in media relations role

A final element of this professionalism period which will go down as being of particular significance is the prominence of special advisors in government communications. Special

³⁰ Evidence to Public Administration Select Committee 21/01/04.

³¹ This happened in 2005 when the GICS was developed into the Government Communication Network (GCN).

³² www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/central/1999/work_gis/index.htm (as viewed 31/12/06).

advisors have played a role in government for many years, working within individual government departments to provide specialist advice to ministers which they would not be able to get from civil servants. They are classified as temporary civil servants and employed for the duration of an administration to provide a political dimension to the non-partisan work of the general civil service.³³ They have not in the past had a significant relationship with journalists. In this period however there has been a noticeable trend for special advisors to regularly act as media advisors to ministers.

The special advisor, Alistair Campbell, controlled media relations for Tony Blair when he was elected in 1997. He spoke to the media with the authority of the Prime Minister himself, attended Cabinet meetings and acquired the reputation of having more influence in decision-making than policy advisers (Osborne 1999: 161). Previous press secretaries have had significant influence and closeness to the PM (in particular Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary) but Campbell was far higher in the Downing Street pecking order than had been seen before and was part of an inner circle of advisers. This led to calls for an investigation into the role of Special Advisers.

The Mountfield review, in September 1997, did look at this and concluded that it is essential for "Press Officers and Special Advisers active in communication matters to keep in very close personal contact... Permanent Secretaries, with their Ministers should monitor these relationships closely and take steps to correct any tendency to diverge" (Mountfield, 1997: 12-13). Following this, a report by the Public Accounts Select Committee³⁴ in August 1998 suggested that a code for Ministers and Special Advisers should be introduced to outline "the obligations on Special Advisers and Ministers to work closely with Press Offices in general and the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman in particular." They also wanted a set of ground rules with the Press Office and the Permanent Secretary on what might be dealt with in their contacts with the media. Again however, like the Mountfield review, they stressed the need for co-operation between Press Offices, Special Advisers and Ministers in presenting information. The Government responded to the report in January 1999 saying they accepted the main thrust of the Committee's thinking but that they saw no need for further guidance saying it was already set out in the Ministerial Code, the Model Contract for Special Advisers and Guidance on the Work of the Government Information Service.

The role of special advisors was looked at year later in a report from the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life titled 'Reinforcing Standards.' Their recommendation was that there

³³ For more to the rules surrounding special advisors see Street (2001: 145-150).

³⁴ The report was into the Government and Information and Communication Service.

should be a separate code of conduct for special advisers to “include a section on the direct media contacts of special advisers, making clear the role they play in relation to the work of Civil Service information staff and in particular the role of the departmental head of information, as set out in the Guidance on the Work of the GIS.”³⁵ The Government responded to this report (Cm 4817) in July 2000, accepting that there should be a separate code for special advisers, and that it should include a section on the direct media contacts of advisers.

A further report from the Select Committee into Public Administration (titled *Boon or Bane*, 2001) in March 2001 said that many special advisers in No 10 work in the area of communications. They said that the posts would not appear to be very dissimilar from positions in the GICS and they questioned whether they really need to be filled by special advisers (Select Committee into Public Administration, 2001).³⁶ They also endorsed the Neill Committee's criticisms of the Model Contract so its failure to mention relations between special advisers and the GICS, and said that the proposed Code of Conduct should give clear guidance on this matter.

These reports eventually had an impact. Following the 2001 election, Alastair Campbell stepped back from briefing the lobby becoming Director of Communications and Strategy at No 10 and handing over the role of Prime Minister's Official Spokesperson (PMOS) to two GICS members of the No 10 Press Office. Shortly after this, the Model Contract for Special Advisers was released. The section on contacts with the media said that:

“Special advisers are able to represent Ministers' views on Government policy to the media with a degree of political commitment that would not be possible for the permanent Civil Service. Briefing on purely party political matters should however be handled by the party machine...all contacts with the news media should be authorised by the appointing Minister and be conducted in accordance with the Guidance on the Work of the GIS, issued on behalf of the Prime Minister. Departmental Heads of Information are responsible for managing press and publicity operations in their department, and should be kept informed of Special Advisers' contacts with the news media not only to ensure consistency of briefing, but also to ensure that contacts are recorded.” (Cabinet Office, 2001)

This did not clear the matter though and the Committee on Standards in Public Life launched an inquiry into *'Defining the Boundaries within the Executive'* in March 2002. The paper included a section highlighting their concerns about the relationships between special advisers and permanent

³⁵ www.archive.officialdocuments.co.uk/document/cm45/4557/chap6.pdf.

³⁶ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmpublicadm/293/29302.htm>.

civil servants.³⁷ The Government's submission offered to provide guidance on the roles of information officers and special advisers, to update the guidance to provide a clarification of these relationships and design induction training for special advisers to support them better.

A report from the Public Administration Select Committee, published as a response to the events at the DTLR³⁸ stated that whilst the guidance promised by the government was welcomed it needed to go further. They said that the row exposed 'serious flaws' in the government's relationship with the civil service and called for the review to examine (1) the roles of all others, both civil servants and special advisers, who have a role in communications, (2) the functions of the Director of Communications at No 10 Downing Street and (3) clarify the boundaries between the work that is appropriate to special advisers and work that is not appropriate to them (Select Committee into Public Administration, 2002).

At about the same time the Wicks Report came out from the Committee for Standards in Public Life which was followed by the Phillis inquiry in 2004. Both touched on the role of special advisers and called for codification and clarification of the position of special advisers, saying they would have to be professionally trained and must not become "an independent 'gateway' channelling instructions out, and government work back into the minister". The issue here is ongoing and it will be interesting to see how their role develops with the GCN.

The Hutton inquiry also had a big impact on this area when Lord Hutton was given a remit to investigate the situation which had occurred when a BBC journalist accused the government of acting like a PR machine and making false statements as evidence for the Iraq war. Case studies throughout this thesis (chapter five and chapter seven) consider what happened during this period so I will not state them twice however it must be noted that it did signify an important period of tension and aggression between political PRs (special advisers in particular) and political journalists.

One overriding element which comes across here is that whilst the political news industry is becoming further convoluted, much of this could be blamed on the spread of globalisation. There have been many examples of party and government communications staff learning from the techniques used in other countries – in particular America. One such example is a meeting set up for speech writers in Whitehall which invited along the guest speaker Dan Twining, a former speechwriter to John McCain, the US senator who in 2000 contended the Republican nomination

³⁷ www.public-standards.gov.uk/ninth%20report/executive_i&q.pdf - paragraphs 4.18 to 4.22. (as viewed on 1/1/06)

³⁸ Where a special advisor suggested 11 September was a good day to "bury" bad news.

for Presidency.³⁹ This has been replicated all over government communications with many members of the Labour Party election team going over to Washington DC before their 1997 election victory. A famous (but never shown in the UK) CBS 60 minutes report in the late 1990s compared and contrasted speeches made by Clinton and Blair and found far more to compare than to contrast. Not just key words, but key phrases and even identical sentences used continuously by both. This globalisation of political communication tactics, techniques and strategies has assisted in the convolution and difficulties of following the current political news industry.

3.8 Conclusion

The political news industry has taken a long time to develop in the industry we recognise today. The first stage, the birth of the political news industry, took a long time to grow as it was only as those journalists with an interest in politics pushed their luck further and further, that they gained concessions from Parliamentarians. Their relentlessness and determination meant they eventually got agreements to remain and report from the Commons by their presence on a 'lobby list' in the late 19th century.

It was not until after the Lobby correspondents' role was formalised in the list, that politicians began to cotton onto the potential role of the press in disseminating their messages. As crises occurred in the early 20th century (such as the First and Second World War or the General Strike) so did the political PR awareness of those working in politics. This formalisation of the political news industry saw the beginning of formal, structured political PR with official information being given out by the government and the government beginning to realise the potential impact of political PR.

Once the formal structured role of political PR was developed, the industry began to grow at a much faster pace, introducing a period of permanency in the political news industry. This period saw members of the Lobby becoming a stable and accepted feature in Westminster, press officers becoming enduring members of government departments and more formal structures put in place for government liaison and intermediation with the news media.

The emergence of a market philosophy in the political news industry was prevalent in the 1970s and 80s and the government incorporated these values into many of their activities and structures. The make-up of the COI changed and rebellions in the Lobby took place, highlighting the coming of age of competition.

³⁹ <http://www.comms.gov.uk/networking/speechwriters/default.htm> (as viewed on 1/1/06)

The final period, described as a convulsion within the political news industry, characterises many of the changes in the complexities of political PR and journalism. The period highlights the news role of communications as an integral element of political party structures and shows how changes to the Lobby system, a focus on professionalism and centralisation and the devolved role of special advisors have all had a significant impact.

It would be very easy to consider this final period as one where the political news industry has reached its zenith. We could state that politicians, party activists and civil servants are news media aware and knowledgeable. We could assert that journalists are far more aware of the media savvy of political PRs and adapt their news gathering behaviour accordingly. These statements, which could be concluded from this historical overview may well also be backed up in my own empirical research. What is not clear from this overview however, and should not be concluded from it, is whether or not this knowledge and savvy is a positive state of affairs. Instead, the effect of this situation and whether it is a positive, negative, or simply different, will form the crux of my research in the rest of this thesis.

Chart 3a: Timeline of political news industry developments

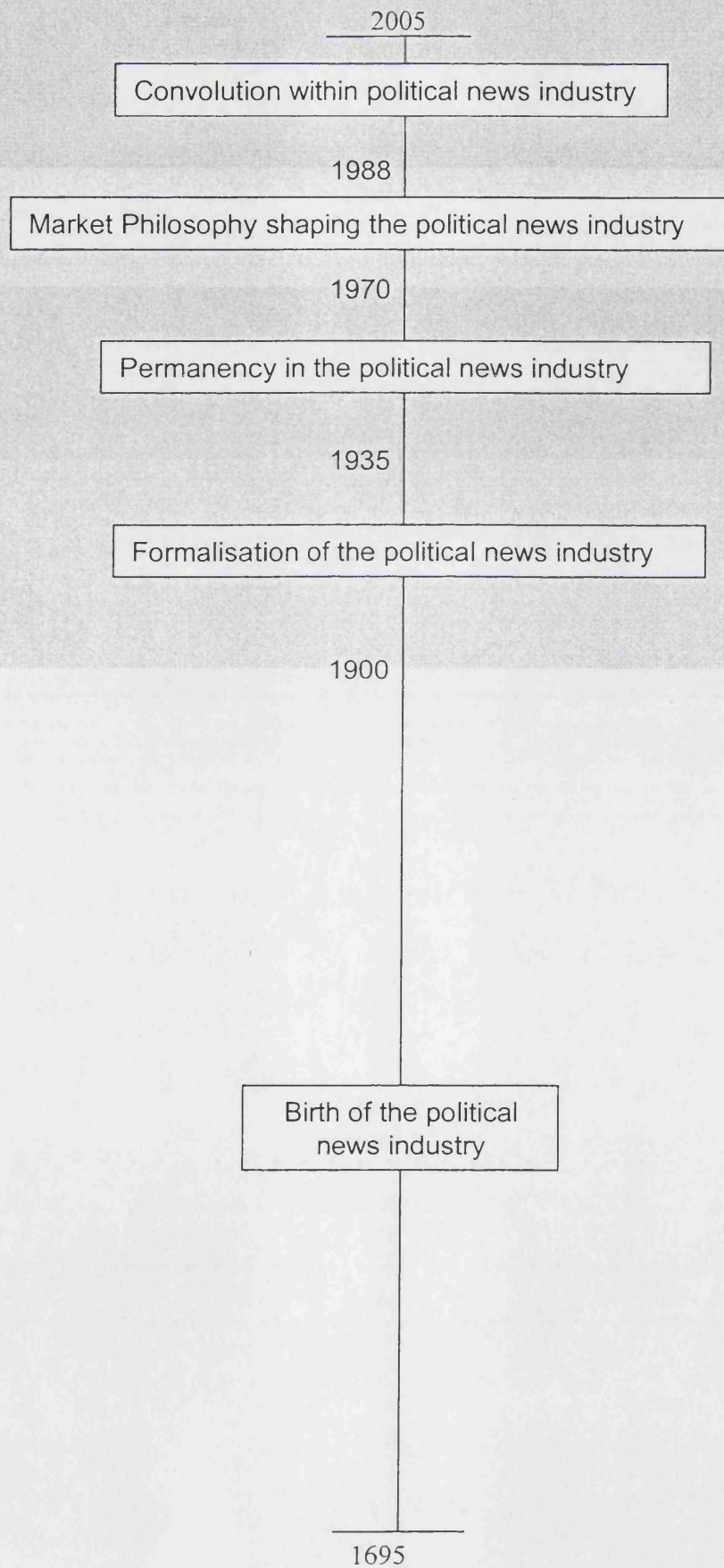


Chart 3b: Timeline – Birth of the political news industry

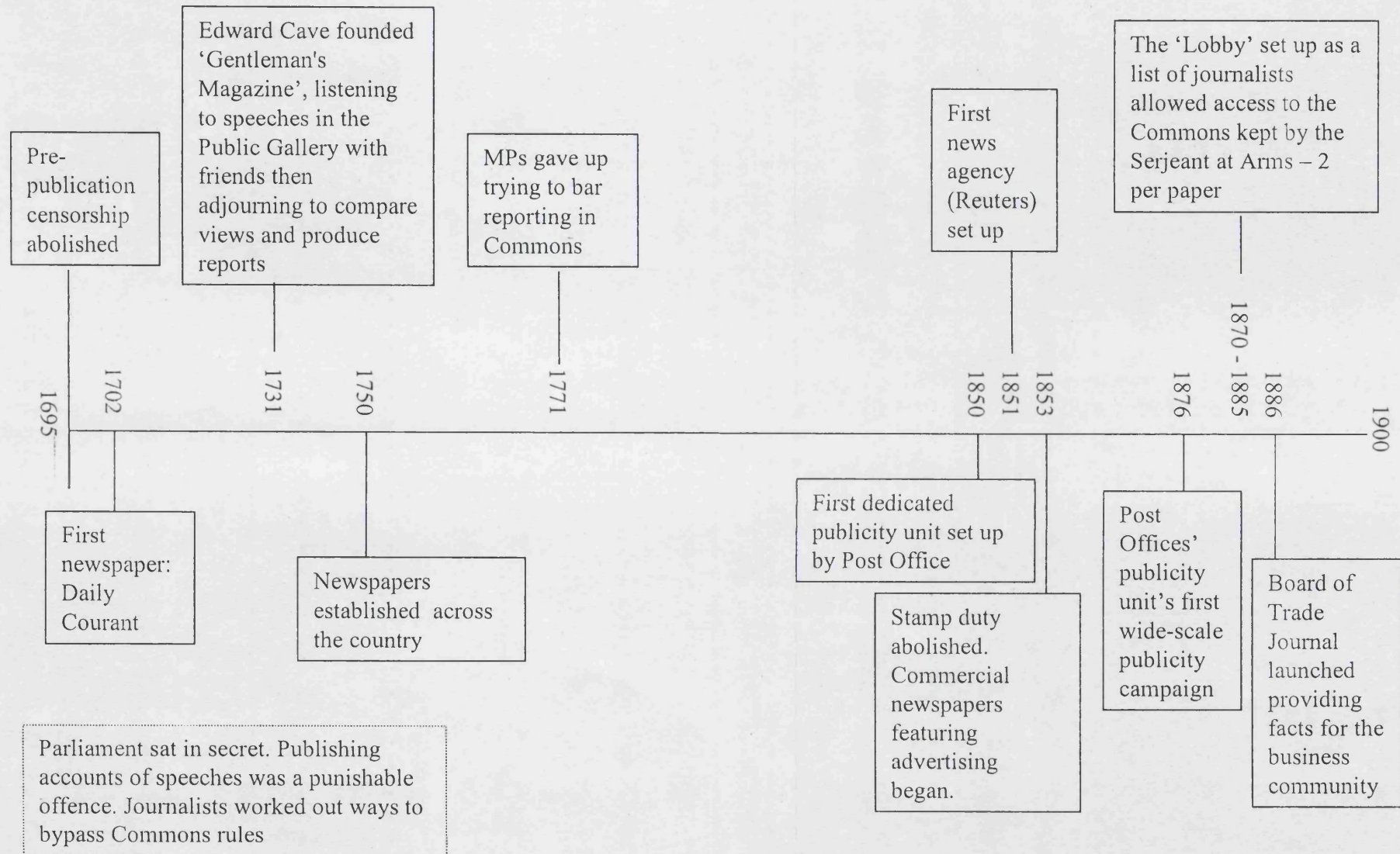


Chart 3c: Timeline – Formalisation of political news industry

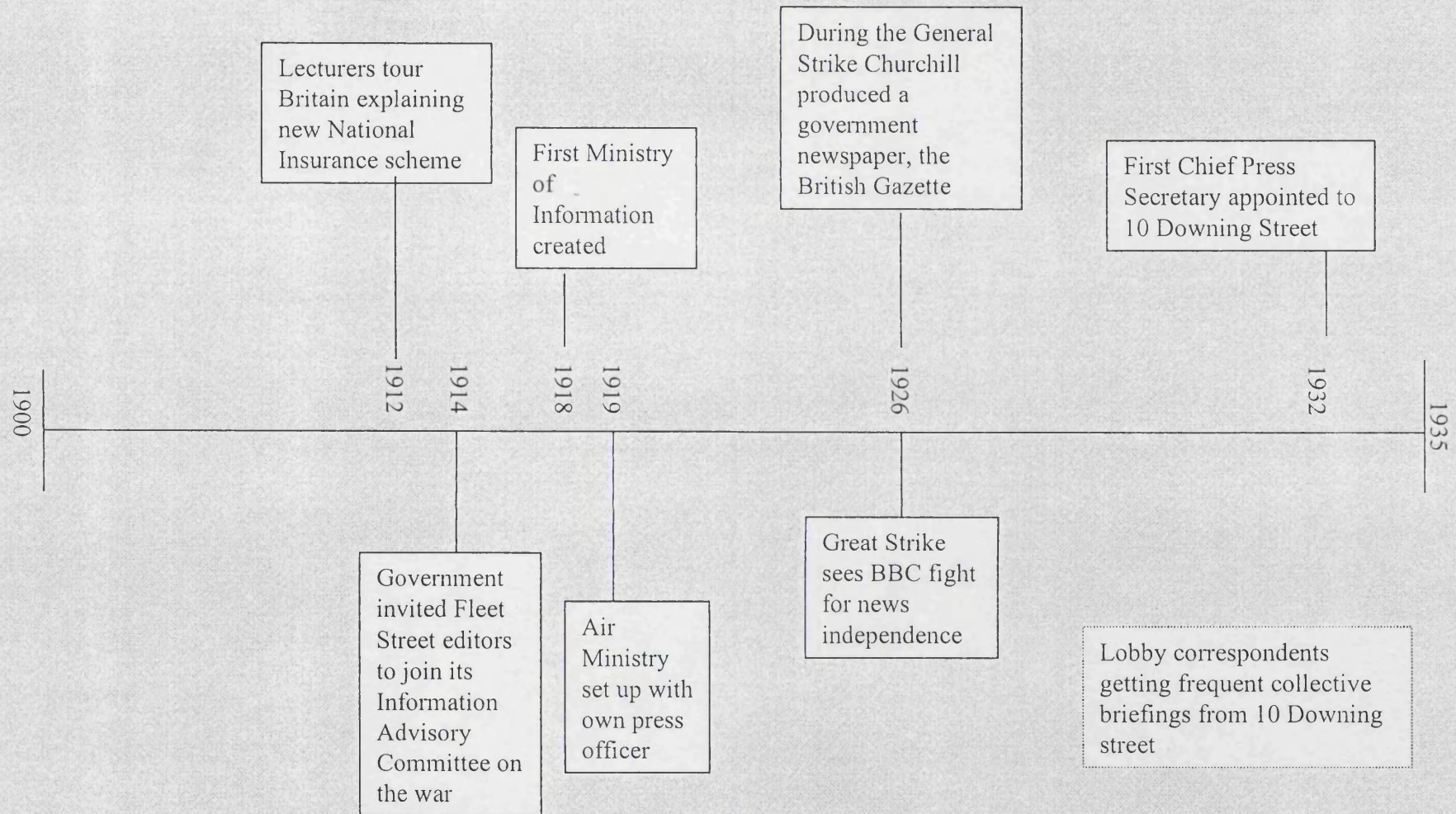


Chart 3b: Timeline – Birth of the political news industry

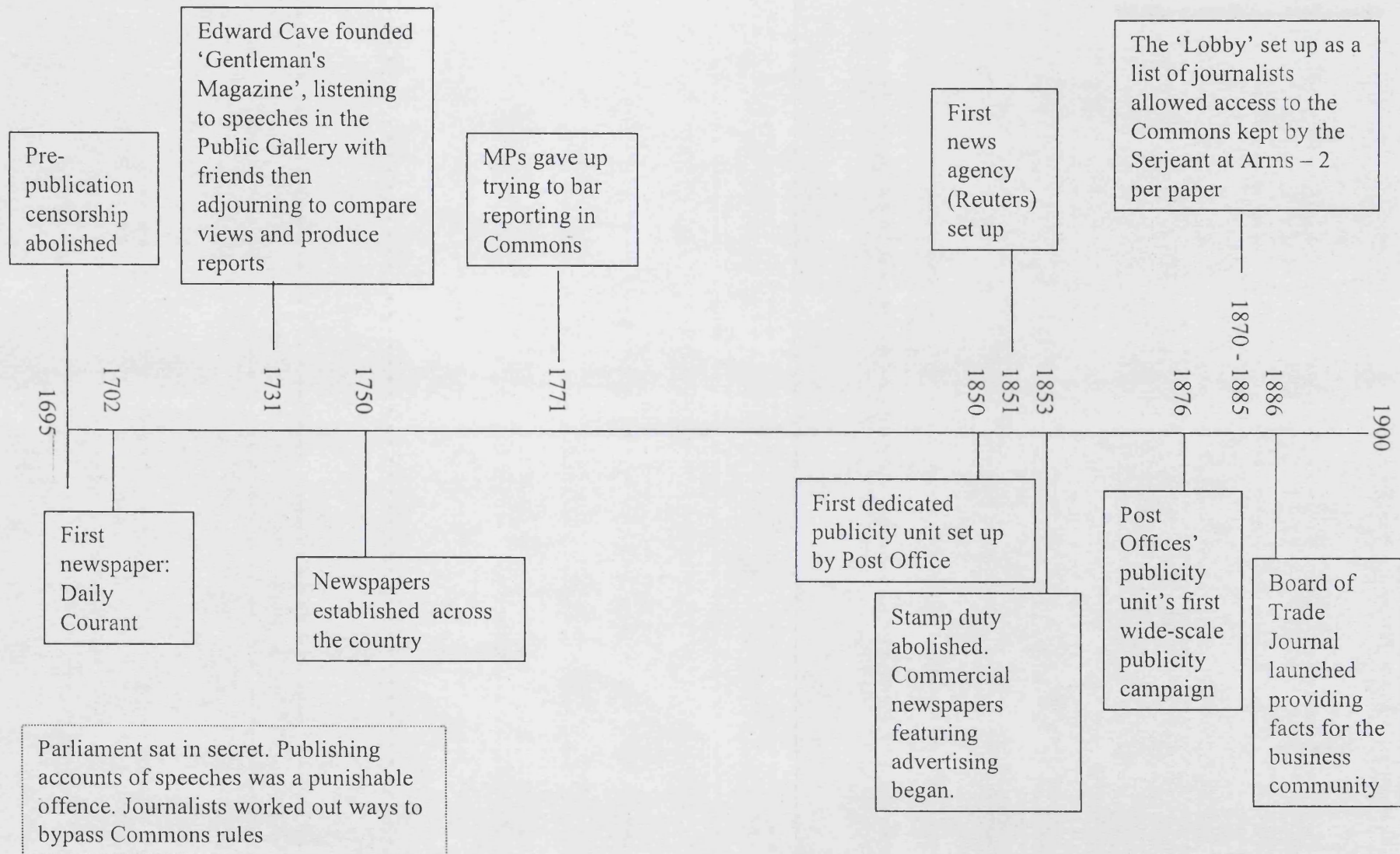


Chart 3c: Timeline – Formalisation of political news industry

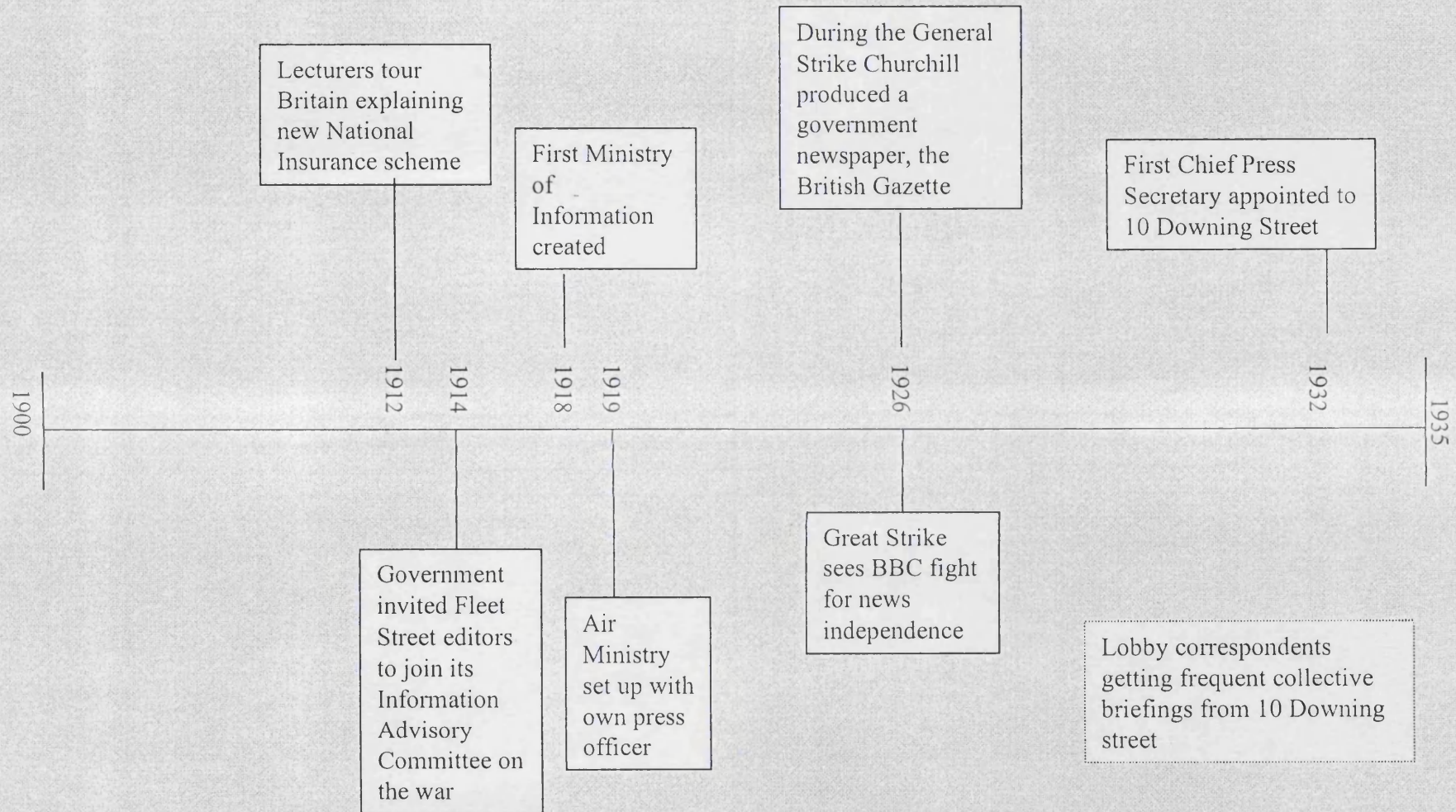


Chart 3d: Timeline – Permanency in the political news industry

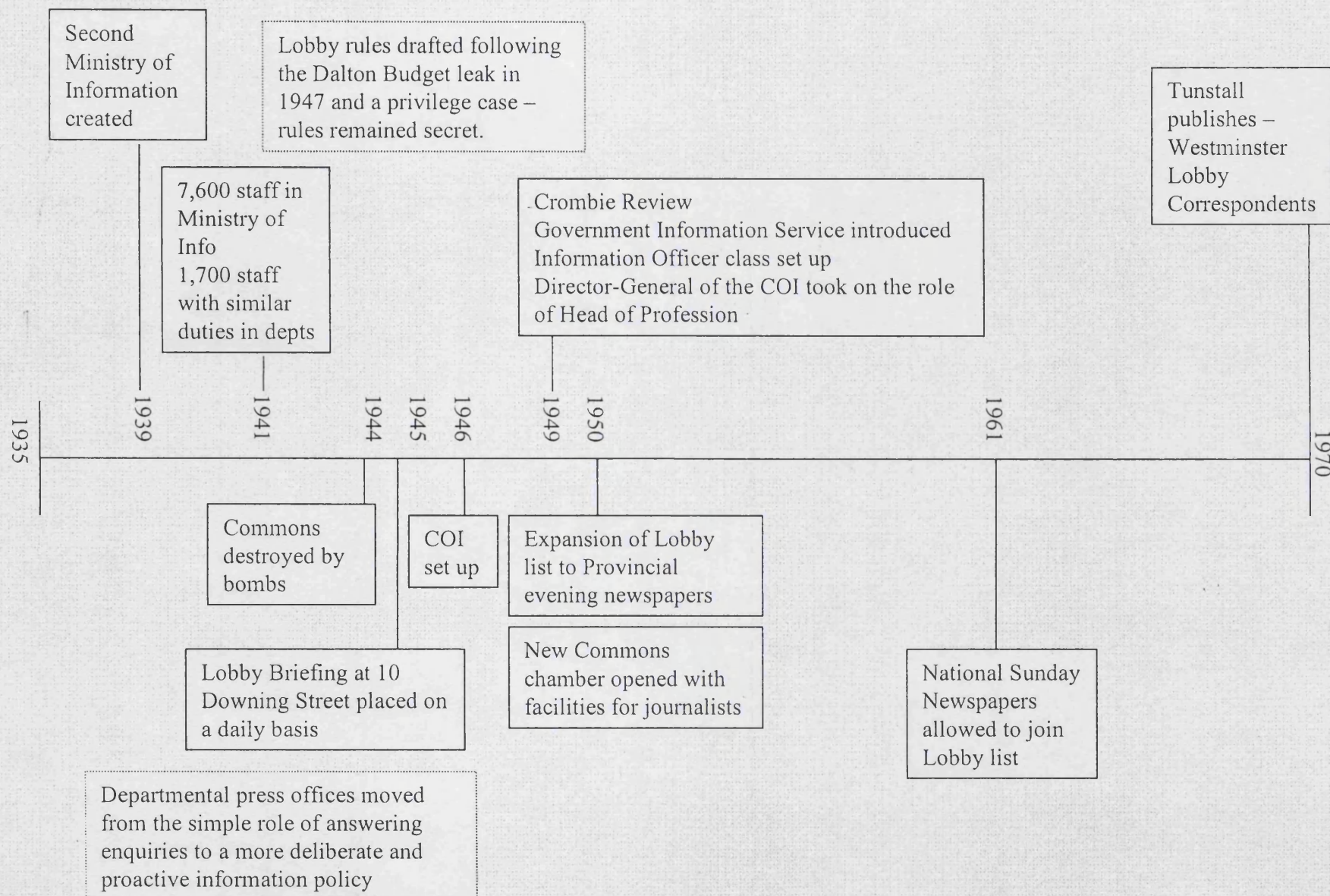


Chart 3e: Timeline – Market Philosophy shaping political news industry

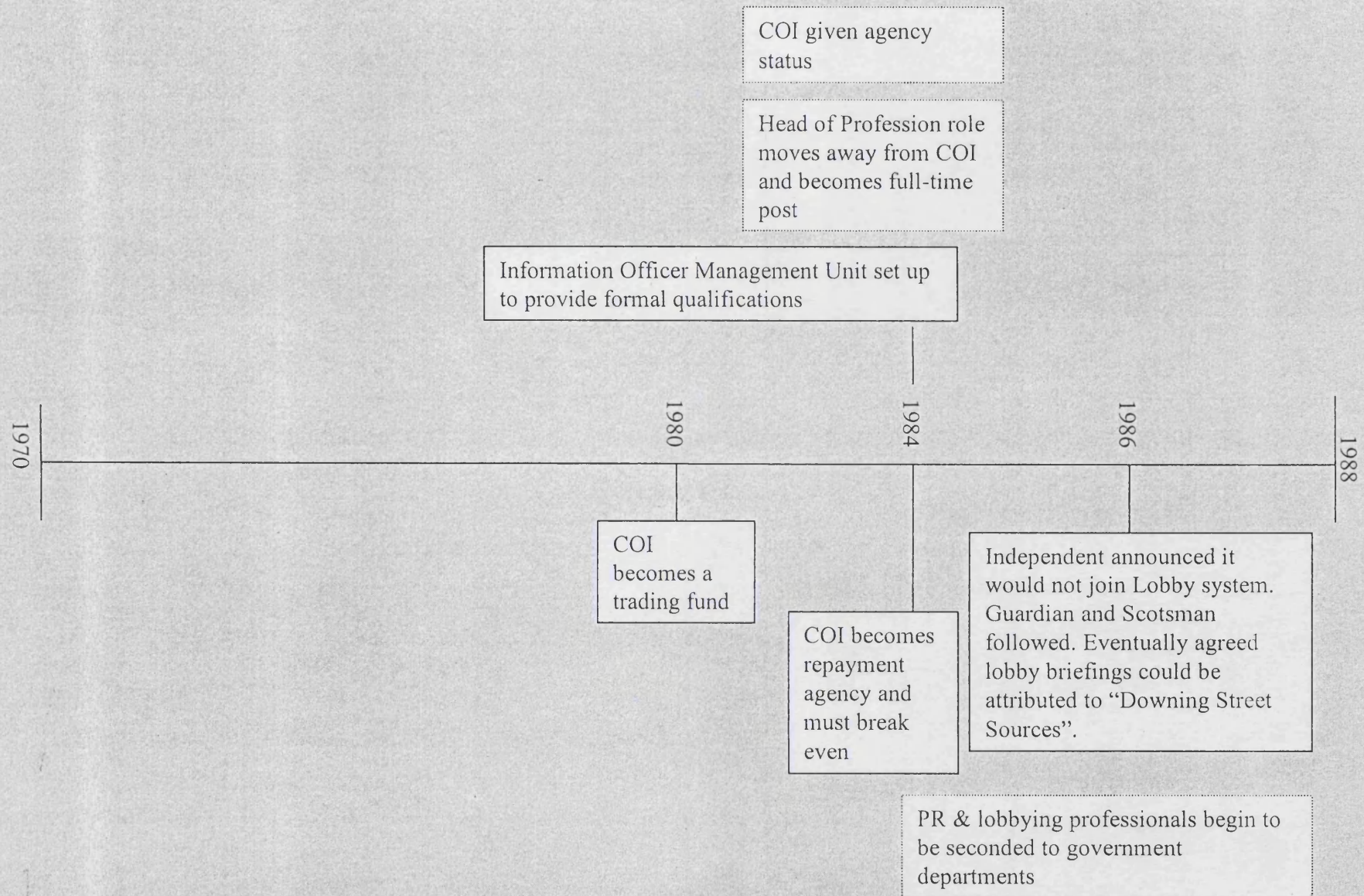
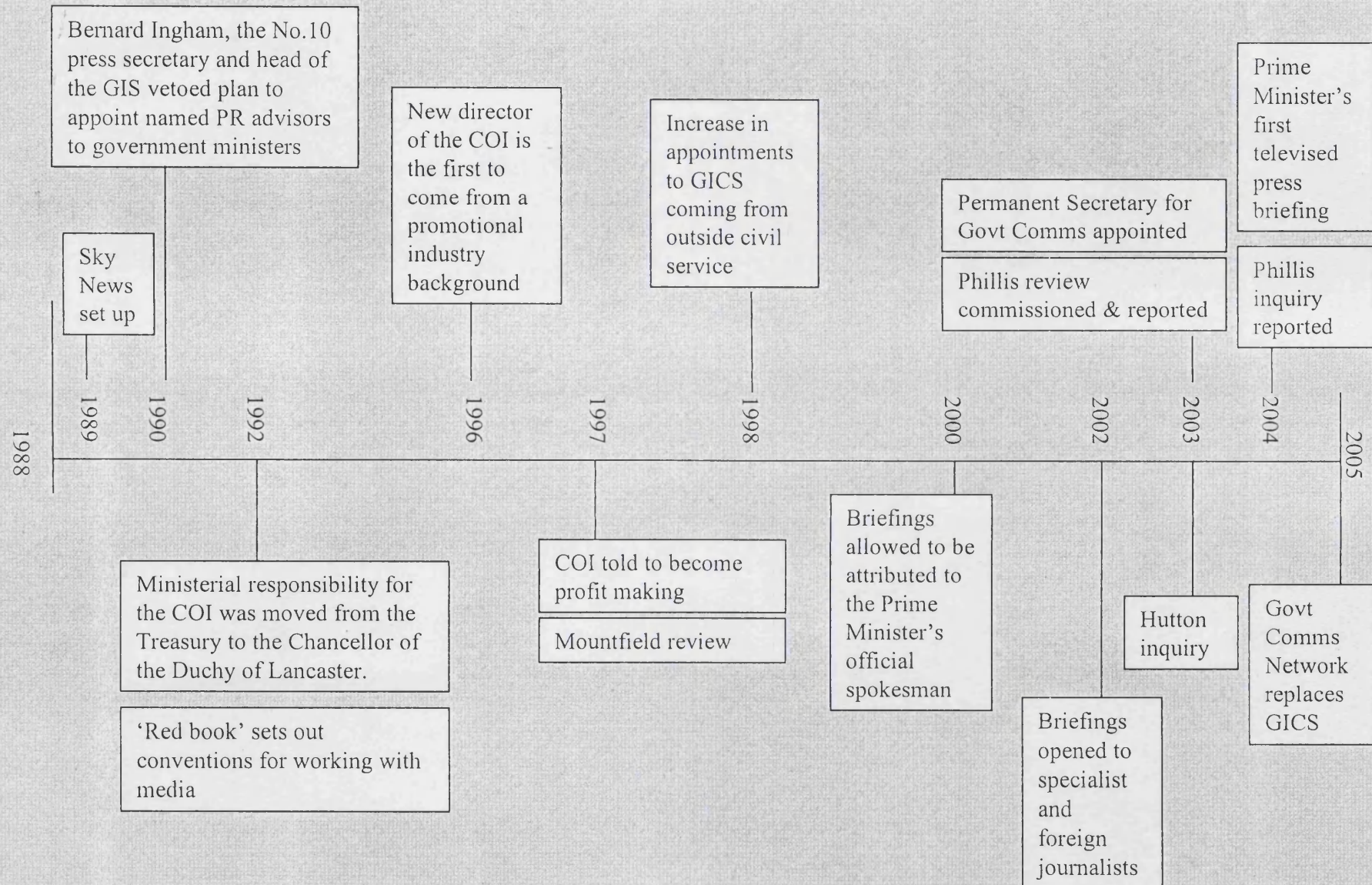


Chart 3f: Timeline – Convolution within the political news industry



CHAPTER FOUR – METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to establish the best method with which to examine the fundamental relationship between political PRs and journalists, to identify techniques used by both groups to gain power and control, consider who holds the upper hand and to contemplate the implications of this relationship on the responsibilities of journalists in a liberal democracy. As the overall study will focus on two main groups of professionals; political journalists and political PRs, and will address four fundamental questions, it is important initially to establish the nature of the questions being asked. They fall between three disciplines, that of politics, considering the nature and forces of power, sociology, considering the structures and processes of human social organisations and, it could also be argued, economics. This acknowledgement of where this research falls however does not as such, unfortunately, lead to an acknowledgement of which type of methodology should be used to unveil those materials which may help to answer these questions.

The choice of methodology to a researcher is almost as crucial as the topic or the title. There are numerous options available and it is tempting to follow either a method with which the researcher is already familiar or one which has been used successfully by earlier researchers covering the political news industry. Research undertaken previously has used ethnography (such as Schlesinger, 1987 and MacGregor, 1997), questionnaires (see Tunstall, 1970, Lichter et al, 1986), interviews (again see Tunstall, 1970) data analysis (see White, 1950), case studies (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994) and content analysis (Norris et al, 1999, Dunleavy & Weir, 1996). Whilst mirroring another researchers' method is tempting (and would certainly aid comparisons with earlier findings) many of the methods previously used in the journalist source arena are unsuitable because of the specific focus of this research; the relationships which exist in the world of the political news industry. It is also important to remember that many methods are unsuitable due to the nature of those on whom data was being collected: political and media elites.

The groups focused on in my research are classed as political news industry elites. They are usually well paid, highly respected and have a higher level of education. Their job enables them exert a high level of power and influence and, when they are unhappy with a public state of affairs, they have some ability to change that situation. They are also often considered to have the plum jobs in their respective industries, MPs in politics, political PRs in PR and political journalists in the news media. As a result, they will have huge demands upon their time, but also a privileged view into a secretive and intriguing industry. The fact that they are classed as elites will have an impact upon my choice of data collection method as it must be sensitive to their position.

One other point of note is that I have worked within the political news industry, as both a freelance television journalist and as a political consultant. I was aware that my knowledge of the industry could prove both an advantage but also a hindrance and was also aware that whatever method was to be used would have to take this situation into account. However, as Tunstall himself says in the preface to *The Westminster Lobby Correspondents*, “the sociologist who ventures among journalists travels especially heavily laden with values. Perhaps by wearing some of these values on his sleeve, he will assist both his readers and himself” (Tunstall, 1970: ix). I intend to follow this viewpoint and use my prior knowledge to my advantage.

Every method was initially considered. However the one which allowed for in-depth assessment, provided sufficient accessibility to these elites, gave an insight into one-to-one relationships and offered opportunities for both opinions and knowledge (Patton, 2002: 349-53) to shine through were semi-structured open interviews.

4.2 Options available

There were various data collection methods available for investigating the day-to-day relationships between political journalists and political PRs. Whatever method is used though should follow some basic rules: it should be appropriate for the target population and the objectives, take place at the most appropriate time, have a collection period long enough to achieve good response rates and it should consider respondent incentives (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). The data collection methods are split into two broad groups, quantitative and qualitative¹.

Quantitative methodologies are concerned with numbers, frequencies and statistical analysis and usually involve large numbers of respondents. Methods such as surveys, questionnaires, psychometric tests and experiments are very useful for certain types of questions which look at relative sizes of effects, whether certain processes are present in an event and to generalise about large populations². Quantitative methodologies were considered but ruled out for three major reasons. The first reason being that these methods require a large amount of data. The political news industry is relatively small and many of its members are considered to be (or consider themselves to be) elites in society. A quantitative method, such as distributing questionnaires to those deeply involved in this industry would only get a respectable response rate if conducted in conjunction with a reputable industry publication. In this case, the group is too small to have their own specific publication and without this it would be highly unlikely that subjects would be willing to put their thoughts on contentious and newsworthy issues down on paper. Even with

¹ Though some researchers also use triangulation which involves mixing methods from both schools.

² For more on quantitative methodologies see Maxim (1999).

backing, the rate of return on questionnaires is often low so the risk of not gaining a significant amount of information would be very high. A further problem plaguing quantitative methods in this specific area is that much of the work produced by political PRs, if done well, is never published. Political PRs often do not create a tangible product and many of their relationships with journalists are conducted behind closed doors. As such, there is often no content to analyse. All that can be done is to conceptualise their working life and so quantitative methods of analysis are unlikely to bear much fruit. Finally, whilst “quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes,” qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 4). It is this social experience, the processes involved and how it relates to the journalists’ role in democratic society which is of interest. For these reasons I decided to take a qualitative stance towards this research.

Qualitative methods seemed more productive as they allow the interviewer to “get closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interview and observation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 5). The relationships that this research will study involve the processes inherent within the political news industries. Qualitative inquiry is highly appropriate for studying process because it depicts detailed descriptions of how people engage with each other, acknowledges that the experience of process typically varies for different people so their experiences need to be captured in their own words, accepts process is fluid and dynamic so cannot be summarised on a single rating scale at one point in time and recognises that participants perceptions are a key process consideration (Patton, 2002: 159). They are also the “methods of choice in extending and deepening the theoretical propositions and understandings that have emerged from previous field studies” (Patton, 2002: 194). As this research derives inspiration from Tunstall’s 1970 study, this should work well.

Within the qualitative arena there are four types of methods which could be used in this research to collect materials: (1) content analysis, (2) ethnography, (3) autoethnography and (4) interviews.³ Content analysis can be dismissed immediately as this would not allow any analysis of the relationships in play in the news media.

Ethnography would involve observing members of the political news industry (PRs and journalists) at work, using case studies to watch the processes involved in collating news stories. These would focus on the people involved and consider the processes used by political journalists when they piece together information to make a story. It would show where information is taken from, allowing for analysis and categorisation of their actions and follow the work of the political

³ For more on qualitative research methods see Patton (2002).

PR pushing a story towards journalists. This would also involve watching and tracking the various methods used by political PRs to push for certain information to be published.

The attraction of ethnography as a method is that it is highly appropriate to answer the basic question “what is the culture of this group?” (Patton, 2002) To approach this, the researcher would need to follow either, or both, political PRs or political journalists as they tackle their daily work; shadowing their every move, listening in on their phone conversations, attending their press conferences and meeting the people they meet. This technique would be interesting but in this media age it is not realistic. Political sources are incredibly fragile and it would be naive to expect any political journalist to risk upsetting or offending a contact by making public their relationship. Beyond this, since earlier investigations, technology has taken over the newsroom. In the past Schlesinger (1978) may have been able to listen into phone calls and see wire copy as it came through the newsroom printer but the newsrooms of today are equipped with email, electronic news production systems, pagers, blackberries and mobile phones. This means that now in a newsroom “that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thought and intentions. We cannot observe behaviours that took place at some previous point in time” (Patton, 2002: 340-1) and relationships are particularly difficult to observe. Increasing our knowledge about these feelings, thoughts, intentions and behaviours, coupled with the growth of methodological dependence in this arena, is too difficult through case studies.

A variation of ethnography is autoethnography where the researcher asks how their own experience of a culture connects with insights about this culture (Patton, 2002). This could be used since my personal experience in the political news world may help me bypass some of the issues of access. The option to use autoethnography is strong as I do have experience in the industry but there are some significant flaws with this. Firstly, one reason for conducting this research initially was to investigate gaps that exist in the literature in the area of political news. Much of it is written on a very personal level, by those highly involved in the area professionally. These authors are using their publications, books or news articles, as a vehicle to push forth their own views and frustrations with the news media industry. Any political PR or journalist could write about the processes involved in taking information from a politician and turning it into a news piece, and many of them already have. A perspective put forward in this way would not only be one sided, but already documented such as in the work by Ingham (1991), Cockerell et al (1984) and Jones (1999 & 2003a). The autoethnography would, I think, mirror this perspective too closely. Even source-centered publications written by those who are not practitioners such as Tiffen (1989) and Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) focus attention on the processes active in shaping material, rather than simply considering the producers of journalistic output and so do not fulfil my criteria. Whilst using their approach would allow me to focus very strongly on the processes involved it would not be extensive enough to provide sufficient information on the relationship between the sources and

producers to allow a full consideration of the interaction, bargaining and tactics used between the two groups. A further issue is that if this option were used it would be best run alongside a content analysis looking at specific publications. This would work back through the systems and processes used to understand how the information became news. Although this method would illuminate the processes involved, it would not be able to offer any insight helpful in addressing the aim of this research: assessing the specific relationships formed between political PRs and journalists. Finally it would only serve to highlight the relationship from the viewpoint of the journalist, not the political PR. I would also be concerned that I am too close to some of the issues involved to be able to perceive them objectively.

Further problems with all these observation techniques arise because they are expensive to conduct and they are also incredibly time consuming (Patton, 2002: 23). Although this should not affect the choice of the ideal methodology, it is a relevant consideration for an unfunded postgraduate research project. Taking this into account it seems then that ethnography in the 24-hour news age, for a project focusing on an issue which is so sensitive, is not a feasible option.

The final, and most relevant method is to use some form of interview. "Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 361). Interviews have a variety of uses including eliciting information from "people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge" (Patton, 2002: 4), ascertaining how those being interviewed view their world, allowing the researcher to learn their terminology and judgments and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences (Patton, 2002: 348). Interviews should allow the researcher to "obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1996: 30).

The most common type of interviewing is face-to-face verbal interchange but it can also take the form of face-to-face group interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 361). The interview will be "theme orientated" (Kvale, 1996: 28) where two people (or more in a group interviewing situation) talk together about a common theme of joint interest. There can be various degrees of flexibility ranging from an open conversation on a theme (unstructured) to a tightly regulated survey with pre-set questions (structured).

Group interviewing "provides an inexpensive, data rich, flexible method" (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 365) which can be stimulating to respondents and allow them to bounce ideas off each other. I think it is unsuitable for this research however for three significant reasons. Firstly, it would be difficult because with packed diaries and numerous deadlines it would be impossible to gather a relevant and sizable group of elites together at the same time. Secondly, it is unlikely that many

political and media elites would be happy to be interviewed together and finally, I will be asking sensitive and often secret information, which few would be prepared to share with anyone else, particularly potential rivals.

Structured interviews, where an interviewer asks a single respondent a series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories, are tempting as they would provide comparable information and ease of analysis. The method allows little room for variation and all information can be recorded via a coding scheme. The interviewer controls the pace but, as the interviews are conducted “like a theatrical script” with all respondents receiving the questions in the same order, there seems to be very little flexibility (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 363). Unfortunately this method would stifle interviewees and limit the ideas they could put forward. This is not consistent with the type of research being conducted here, which is being undertaken with elites who are strongly opinionated, highly eloquent and, I hope, able to surprise with new ideas and views not originally considered.

This leaves the option of unstructured or semi-structured interviews. There are numerous accounts of these type of interviews (see: Fontana & Frey 2000, Adams & Preiss 1960, Denzin 1989, Lofland 1971, Spradley 1979, Kvale 1996) “whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996: 5-6). They use open-ended questions to “enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories” (Patton, 2002: 21).

4.3 Chosen method

The advantage of qualitative semi-structured interviews for my study, above any other method, is that they illuminate actual relationships. In order to demystify the processes in the political news industry, this relationship is the key to understanding how the political news industry works. An effective way to assess this relationship seems to be to extract information from interviews with members of both groups separately and then compare it at a later date. This more focused and rewarding approach would involve contacting those of significance and experience directly and would use in-depth, open interviews to capture the thoughts of those who have shaped, and will continue to shape, the industry. This method allows an insight beyond the basic: who does what, when and how. It provides opportunities to see the links and intricacies in the processes that occur between the political PRs and journalists and to understand how both groups compare with what is expected of them democratically.

The only obvious negative aspect with using semi-structured interviews is in comparison to the use of ethnography. Whilst an ethnographic researcher would be able to fade into the background of a newsroom or press office and pick up the raw and open conversations and activities, the interviewer must be aware that their respondents will be trained to give 60 minute interviews for their communications role and, as such, the materials will be sanitised and purified by the interviewee in order to remove anything which may reflect badly. This sanitisation, and the professional interviewee techniques used, must be taken into consideration when analysing the final materials.

Before any interviews take place it is essential that the researcher develop a view over the entire investigation prior to the tape recorder being turned on (Kvale, 1996: 99-95), to learn beforehand the interviewees “categories for rendering explicable and coherent the flux of raw reality” (Lofland, 1971: 7). This can be achieved through reading into the subject but also becoming familiar with the environment in which the interviews will be conducted (Kvale, 1996: 95). It becomes the task of the qualitative researcher to provide “a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view” (Patton, 2002: 21).

The semi-structured interview being used here will focus on not being “strictly structured with standardised questions” whilst also not being entirely non-directive (Kvale, 1996: 31). A general direction will be given and, to ensure the interview is focused on the right issues, a grid will be designed covering all the areas of interest and relevance. The grid can then be developed into an interview guide. The guide lists the questions or issues that are to be explored during the interview and ensures that all the basic lines of inquiry will be pursued. It provides the topics and subject areas within which the interviewer can explore, probe and ask questions. The guide allows the interviewer to build a conversation within a pre-determined subject area. It allows the best use of limited time and allows comparisons to be more comprehensive and systematic. The types of questions which will come from these guides will cover three areas: (1) opinion questions which are aimed at understanding the cogitative and interpretative processes of people, (2) knowledge questions which inquire about the respondent’s factual information and (3) background and demographic questions (Patton, 2002: 349-53).

The aim was to interview members of the three groups who all work (to a lesser or greater extent) in the political news industry: political journalists, political PRs and politicians. Whilst it makes obvious sense to interview the two groups whose relationship is being investigated it maybe less obvious as to why politicians were also being interviewed. There were two reasons for their inclusion. Firstly, they are a vital part of the mix. The political PR gets their power from two sources, the fact that they feed information to political journalists and that they are the mouthpiece

of politicians (for more on this see chapter seven, section 7.2). Their actions, on the whole, come from the wishes of their bosses: the politicians, and so it is vital to consider the views of those who set their directions and agendas. The second reason for including politicians is to gain knowledge and opinions from those closest to the groups being studied and to those who can see the way relationships develop, work and build. The politician is in a perfect position to do this and so the materials they can supply should provide an invaluable resource.

The grid and guide (see appendix one) was designed to establish a framework which guarantees that core topics are covered for all three groups being interviewed. The guides were designed to be balanced with similar questions being given to the political journalists and political PRs to enable comparison of each groups' views of themselves and each other. A guide was also constructed for politicians. This was more open so as to encourage honest opinions about both groups and their relationships to them. The guides were piloted and re-evaluated before the full interviews took place.

My main fear with using qualitative interviewing is that the role of the researcher is pivotal as both "the strength and weakness of qualitative research lies in the interviewing and interpreting skills of the researcher" (Robson & Foster, 1989: 26). Many guides are given detailing what these skills are but the most important ones seem to focus on manner, (being friendly, courteous, conversational and unbiased) stance (putting the respondent at ease so that they will talk freely and fully) (Selltiz et al, 1965: 576) and ensuring the interviewer does "not give their own opinions and evade direct questions" (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 369). The interviewer must also ask questions which are open-ended, neutral, singular and clear and do not allow the option of only a yes or no answer (Patton, 2002: 353-60).

Kvale (1996: 13) says there is no common procedure for interview research yet sets criteria for semi-structured interviewing which include points such as: the shorter the interviewer's questions and the longer the subject's answers the better, that the ideal interview is largely interpreted throughout the interview and that it should be self-communicating, hardly requiring extra descriptions and explanations (Kvale, 1996: 145). There are also some general techniques suggested which include breaking the ice with general questions, then moving onto more specific ones before adding in some questions to test the validity of questions asked earlier in the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 371). One final issue is for the interviewer to decide which persona to take on. Do they position themselves as an outsider or "learner" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984: 26) or as an insider, who understands the terminology and processes and can make the interviewee feel more comfortable in referring further contacts? (Gamson, 1995:87) With my background in the industry I do feel like an insider as I know the terminology and some of the processes. However I was determined to remain neutral, impartial and objective and so wanted to position myself with

interviewees as, if not an outsider, at least as a learner. Finally, the interviewer must also strive to establish a rapport so as not to undermine neutrality and must focus on keeping control by knowing what you need to find out, asking focused questions and listening attentively in order to establish the quality and relevance of responses (Patton, 2002: 275-6).

A major factor of any research proposal is who the respondents should be and how they will be chosen. Sampling per se is not as significant in qualitative research as it would be in quantitative and so my study will use purposeful sampling, selecting cases for study because they are information-rich and illuminative, rather than highly representative or considered to be 'normal'. Those chosen will be selected because they are able to provide insight about the political news industry not because they show an empirical generalisation from a sample to a population. What would be considered to be bias in statistical (or quantitative) sampling is an intended focus in qualitative sampling. "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for studying in depth...thus the term purposeful sampling" (Patton, 2002: 230). Or to put it more bluntly, but accurately: "in judgement sampling you decide the purpose you want informants to serve and you go out and find some" (Bernard, 2000: 176).

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews with political PRs.

To assess how political PRs assert their influence I wanted to conduct personal, semi-structured interviews with current and former special advisors, press officers in government departments and those who work in media relations for the main political parties. The interviews were to be conducted in an open, informal format as those working in the political news industry are, by their very nature, eloquent, bright and eager to externalise their ideas. The questions were focused on gathering information and opinions on the way that special advisors and political public relations specialists think they assert their influence and the methods by which they achieve this.

The interview guides for political PRs were designed to utilise the interviewees' acquired knowledge from their years working within the political news industry, to capture their ideas of what makes news and to discover their most effective ways of ensuring the information they release is of interest to journalists. The guides require the political PR to identify their role in the political news industry and consider the level of power and influence they award to themselves and to their profession as a whole. Whilst some political PRs count their work with the media as only one element of their job, my questions remained firmly focused on the media facing aspects of their roles.

To understand the issues from as many perspectives as possible I aimed to speak to a selection of people from all levels of the industry, from those who are newer to the profession as well as those

who have helped develop it. I also wanted to consider the views of those who have now left the industry entirely or have moved into less political or media related jobs, who would be able to give a view with a greater historical perspective.

4.3.2 Semi-structured interviews with political journalists.

To establish the other side of the relationship I wanted to conduct semi-structured interviews with political journalists. Again, the reasoning for using open interviews was because people in this profession would respond most positively to this. I also thought it would provide the greatest insight into the decisions made by journalists on how far to incorporate political PRs' stories, views and ideas into their work. A main objective of these interviews was to highlight the level of awareness by journalists of the methods employed by political PRs and to determine if they are able to identify those methods. I was also keen to discover if they had an antidote to these methods in order to bypass them. All the journalists I requested interviews with are considered to be prominent within their profession.

4.3.3 Semi-structured interviews with politicians.

Politicians also have a key role in the political news industry though often their role seems to be sidelined in the journalist/political PR spectrum. The interviews with MPs were designed to be run as short, personal, semi-structured interviews, using many of the same general questions that I asked the political PRs. The interviews were to be conducted under an open, informal format and designed to last for no longer than 40 minutes as realistically politicians will rarely set aside any longer than this for a student meeting. The interview guide set out questions to ask MPs on how they see the political and news media industries, the relationship between the two and their views on both political PRs and political journalists. The guide included questions aimed at getting the politician to identify their role in the relationship.

I aimed to interview about five or six politicians, splitting the group between those who currently are or were at cabinet level and now have, or have had, their own special advisors and those backbench MPs who have strong points of view on the role of political PRs and their relationships with the media.

4.3.4 Piloting

Guidelines for both qualitative and quantitative research undertaken in the USA say that any research or material collection should minimise 'respondent burden'. One way of doing this is through piloting to pre-test for the difficulty and interpretability of questions and for ease of

navigation.⁴ Pilot interviews not only test the quality of the questions, they also provide an opportunity for the interviewer to practice. Given the importance of the role of the interviewer in this technique, it is suggested that the interviewer conducts several pilot interviews to “increase their ability to create safe and stimulating interactions” (Kvale, 1996: 147).

All three interview guides were piloted. The piloting was conducted to assess that the method was realistic and workable and to ensure that the questions in the interview guide were feasible. I also wanted to ensure the questions and tactics were not too complex or off-putting for respondents to complete and to identify any “potential practical problems in following the research procedure” (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

Peat et al describe some specific rules governing pilots the main ones being to administer the questions to pilot subjects in exactly the same way as they will be administered in the main study, to ask the subjects for feedback to identify ambiguities and difficult questions, to record the time taken to complete the questionnaire and decide whether it is reasonable, to discard all unnecessary, difficult or ambiguous questions and to assess whether each question gives an adequate range of responses. They also suggest establishing that replies can be interpreted as necessary, that all questions are answered and afterwards to shorten, revise and if possible pilot again (Peat et al, 2000: 123). Whilst I stuck to these rules strongly, a problem I found was that when I found an ‘elite’ willing to spend an hour with me for an interview I did not want to waste their time, knowledge or expertise in using them for a pilot. I felt I should pilot questions on non elites but had to do so in the knowledge that they may well react differently to questions than an elite interviewee might.

4.3.5 Significant issues

The biggest predicament with carrying out this research via interviews is that they involve elites (see section 4.1) and access to elites is difficult. Not only are there very few potential interviewees but their time is highly prized and they are not keen for outsiders to get an insight into ‘their world,’ a world which is incredibly difficult to penetrate without significant co-operation. They “establish barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society” (Hertz & Imber, 1995: viii), which “involve problems of access to the interviewees” (Kvale, 1996: 101). Whilst this may be disconcerting, it is essential to solve these access difficulties if the research is “to expose the reach of power in the hope of clarifying it for those who are subject to it” (Hertz & Imber, 1995: viii). Whilst there does not appear to be a significant literature concerned with the processes and techniques for interviewing elites there are a few which provide some basic guidelines.

⁴ http://nces.ed.gov/statprog/2002/std3_2.asp (as viewed on 08/09/04).

Initially, I approached the interviews by sending out formal letters of request from a LSE PhD student. Previous personal access is obviously incredibly helpful to “avoid the frustration of cold calling” (Thomas, 1995: 8) but to speak to people with whom I did not know nor have contact details or a previous relationship; I used a range of methods. I mainly used link tracing methodologies (Spreen, 1992) that identify social networks of identified respondents to provide a researcher with an expanding set of potential contacts (Thompson, 1997). One such method I named the ‘stalker approach’, attending events where the potential interviewee was speaking or attending and to introduce myself and ask for an interview. Another approach involved networking to ensure I became integrated into the world of the researched; making approaching the interviewee a far more relaxed affair. Finally I used the snowballing technique (Flick, 2002: 57) asking interviewees to employ their networks to my advantage by providing the names of other possible interviewees (Thomas, 1995: 12). It is useful for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and at its simplest, involves identifying further interviewees from current interviewees. The advantage of this technique is that it allows access to difficult to reach or hidden populations, so it is ideal for my study. It proved highly successful in not only gathering the names of other interviewees who would be helpful but also for simple contact details of those people who are either difficult to locate or who try to keep their contact details hidden due to their position. I was also open to the option of opportunistic research where I could make on-the-spot decisions to take advantage of any unforeseen opportunities which arose after fieldwork began (Patton, 2002: 240). Working in the industry in which my study took place provided such prospects for taking on opportunistic research.

Once access problems have been overcome then a further difficulty is that the interviewer is required “to have a good grasp of the interview topic in order to entertain an informed conversation” (Kvale, 1996: 101). A substantial familiarity with the theme and context of the inquiry is therefore necessary if the interview method is to be used correctly (Kvale, 1996: 108). This can be achieved by taking up Thomas’ suggestion of fully researching the elite interviewees before meeting with them. He suggests using databases of news media information such as Lexis-Nexis and Who’s Who (Thomas, 1995: 6) to ensure that the interviewee has confidence in the ability of the interviewer. The interviewer must establish this confidence by displaying a thorough knowledge of the topic and projecting an accurate conceptualisation of the problem (Rossman & Rallis, 1998: 134). Thomas says even if these secondary sources are insufficient they should still be consulted as they will allow the interviewer to make the most of what time you are likely to be given if you do get access (Thomas, 1995: 6).

When actually going into the field to conduct the interviews, Thomas discusses ways to feel comfortable interviewing elites. He suggests wearing appropriate clothes, feeling at ease within

yourself and warns against feeling 'honoured' to be given the elites' time and thus being tempted to be less assertive than you would otherwise have been (Thomas, 1995: 12). My job, working in the political news industry, ensured that I was already aware of the dress code for the industry and was used to working with those considered 'elite', so was unlikely to adapt my interview technique to become deferential.

With regards to obtaining the materials, Thomas suggests being clear to the interviewee about the persona you wish to interview, clarifying ground rules, setting controls, supplementing information with other forms of material collection and trying to continue the relationship after the interview is over (Thomas, 1995: 10-12). He also suggests trying to schedule interviews for the time preceding lunch so that either the interview can run over or you may get introduced to further potential interviewees over lunchtime (Thomas, 1995 :12). Finally he suggests ensuring that you can be flexible and prepared to meet interviewees at a time and place convenient to them (Thomas, 1995: 9).

4.3.6 Ethical considerations

An ethical stance needs to be established before any research takes place. Many of the complex ethical decisions that take place in methodology (as discussed by Christians, 2000, Kvale, 1996, Rubin and Rubin 1995, Punch 1997, Eisner & Peshkin 1990 & Kimmel 1988) are not valid in this research as the interviews will be straightforward and very open. The main ethical considerations that needed addressing in my research were whether the interviewee had given informed consent, their right to privacy and their protection from any harm that their answers could cause them in the future.

Kvale specifically considers the ethical issues at each stage of the research process. At the original thematizing stage the research must ensure that the interview should improve the human situation investigated. At the design stage, he says the researcher must obtain informed consent and consider any possible consequences of the study for the subjects. When it comes to interviewing he says that it is essential the researcher clarifies and confirms the consent, is aware of any possible issues of stress during the interview and is sensitive to any questions or areas which may prompt the interviewee to change their self-image post interview. Once the interviews are complete there is still a need to preserve their confidentiality and transcribe loyally. The final analysis and write up must also consider whether the subjects have a say in how they are analysed, continue to preserve confidentiality and to consider the consequences for interviewees and their organisation if the work is published (Kvale, 1996: 111). Alongside all these issues, however, the researcher needs to make the interview offer as attractive and simple and as non-intrusive as possible.

I used two specific tactics to ensure these considerations were adhered to. To ensure confidentiality, to minimise adverse consequences in the event of the research being published, to ensure consent and to maximise the chance of access, I offered interviewees the option of keeping their name and organisation anonymous. I promised to list only their discipline (print or broadcast for journalists, government or party for political PRs) and to submit the full list of names to examiners on a separate sheet. I also tried to approach the interviewees in a highly flexible manner in order to make the elite interviewees feel comfortable in talking to me and to increase trust and goodwill. I ensured that my interviewees had given informed consent but as I did not want to scare potential interviewees by sending them long ethical documents, I simply wrote a line about ethical considerations in the email I sent to confirm the interview and offered further information should they require it.

One concern about granting anonymity is that whilst it allows the interviewees to speak candidly and without fear of reprisal, they are also able to exaggerate and perhaps be liberal with the truth without leaving me any opportunity to check what they are saying. The potential of this is difficult to assess and the opportunities for interviewees to exaggerate are high yet I felt the positive aspects of increasing my interview pool outweighed the negative and small possibilities of false information.

4.4 Collection of research materials

4.4.1 Invitation to interview and response rate

Researchers are divided on the necessary number of required interviewees for a successful research project. Kvale claims it is 15 +/- 5 but also states that researchers should interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know (Kvale, 1996: 101-102). Beyond this he also talks of conducting interviews “until a point of saturation, where further interviews yield little new knowledge” (Kvale, 1996: 102). Patton says there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry and that sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done in the time and resources (Patton, 2002: 244). Lincoln and Guba recommend sample selection “to the point of redundancy...in purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximise information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 202).

Following these suggestions I originally aimed to interview 25 to 30 people – hoping that, ideally, I would reach saturation point, the point of redundancy, before I had interviewed this amount. With this in mind and expecting a response rate of about 25 per cent, I initially requested about 100 interviews.

I created a list of about 100 special advisors and party communicators, 50 political journalists and 50 MPs of whom I thought my research would benefit. From this list I wrote to the 100 to whom I was most keen to talk. I wrote on LSE headed paper and tailored each letter to the recipient. This included mentioning if I had met them at a networking event, had read their book if they had written on the subject, or had read any media articles in which they had been quoted or had written on the subject. Before sending any further letters I waited six weeks in order to assess take up and to see where there were likely to be gaps in the responses. It has been suggested that all materials and data collection programs require some follow-up of non-respondents to achieve desirable response rates.⁵ However, in this case, the response rate was such that further letters were not necessary. The only further letters I did send out were to request an interview with anyone who had been suggested by another interviewee, the snowballing approach.

The final response rates were:

Group	Number asked	Interviewed	Declined	Unable to arrange	No answer
Journalists	41	7 (17%)	7 (17%)	5 (12%)	22 (54%)
Politicians	26	6 (23%)	15 (58%)	0 (0%)	5 (19%)
Political PRs	50	17 (34%)	13 (26%)	1 (2%)	19 (38%)
Total	117	30 (26%)	35 (30%)	6 (5%)	45 (38%)

Chart 4a: Interview request response rates

My overall response rate was 32 per cent. Whilst many researchers do use response rates for “judging the quality of surveys” (Biemer & Lyberg, 2003) and some specific attempts at refining response rate definitions have been contributed by Groves (1989) and Lessler and Kalsbeck (1992), a 1992 survey of response rate calculation procedures among 38 academic survey organizations revealed little consistency in response rate estimation methods (Spaeth, 1992). AAPOR (2000) have published a set of standard definitions for survey dispositions and outcome formulae and groups such as the National Centre for Education Research in the USA state that “response rates should be used to ensure survey estimates are computed consistently across all their surveys.”⁶ They do this by calculating sample base weights. For my type of research however

⁵National Center for Education Statistics http://nces.ed.gov/statprog/2002/std3_2.asp (viewed on 08/09/04)

⁶http://nces.ed.gov/statprog/2002/std3_2.asp (as viewed on 08/09/04)

this is not possible as there are no figures available as to all those working in the relevant industries and certainly no substantial figures on those considered to be elite within these industries. Whilst they put forward complex ratio equations to consider whether a survey or interview programme has been successful they do not equate to an interview programme of the type I am carrying out.

The most common response rate was no response at all. Whilst 81 per cent of MPs responded, this is to be expected as MPs have secretarial and diary staff, who are employed, in part, to reply to letters such as mine. Some special advisors and former party communications staff (many of who still work in the wider communications industry) also have secretarial assistance. Journalists rarely have this type of help and, therefore, to have half of my letters unanswered was not surprising. Journalists who declined to give an interview said they did so due to time constraints. Even some of those journalists who did except my offer had to pull out later on because of a lack of time. Only two special advisors turned me down because 'they felt they were in a position where they did not feel they could talk to me' and all others again stated a lack of time. The politicians who declined to be interviewed stated this was due to the fact that they did not know enough about the subject. Many of the interviews had to be rearranged, though only six could not be rearranged at all. Unfortunately these were nearly all journalists, who probably have the most demands upon their time and the most unpredictable schedules.

I did have further avenues to follow and had the opportunity to follow up those people who had not answered (38 per cent) but once I had conducted about twenty five interviews I reached the point of saturation, with the same points beginning to be made over and over again – even from those in different groups. This saturation point meant that fewer and fewer new ideas were being raised by those I was interviewing. I decided at this point to continue interviewing those who had already agreed to meet with me and then to conclude the proactive stage of the research.

Whilst I did not get equal numbers of interviews from the three groups this was not a concern as the industries to which I am talking are inter-related and many of those I interviewed had worked across the industries. Many former party communications staff had been special advisors in the past and many special advisors or party communications staff were previously journalists. Even some of the MPs I interviewed had worked as journalists or special advisors. This highlights how incredibly insular the political news industry is and how movement between the groups could be classed as fluid.

I promised all my interviewees that their names would not be mentioned. However I am keen to highlight the quality of those with whom I spoke. The 30 interviewees have either held, or still hold, the following positions and four of them had also written books on 'spin':

Journalist	Political PR	Politician
Print (8)	Special advisor (7)	MP (6)
Broadcast (6)	Head of communications for party (7)	Govt minister (3)
Documentary maker (1)	Govt press officers / press secretary (5)	Lords (2)
Interviewees with journalistic experience (15)	Interviewees with Political PR experience (19)	Interviewees with political experience (11)

Chart 4b: Interviewee experience levels

Some interviewees, usually those who no longer held public positions, asked for their names to be mentioned and their views to be quoted. Others, especially those still being paid by the public purse, were much more subtle, keener to have their identity kept hidden and usually gave the most interesting information in the lift once the interview had officially finished and the notebook was put away!

4.4.2 Logistical issues and observations

Once I had overcome the problems of access and trust in order to get the interviews, there were four specific issues which arose during the actual interview process.

When conducting the interviews I used shorthand rather than tape. My initial reasoning for this was a concern about equipment problems such as a tape running out or not working correctly. Beyond this however, it soon became apparent within my first interview that there would be a lack of stable controllable environment in which to interview. Many interviews took place in noisy offices with high levels of background noise; one took place by the Thames, another in Hyde Park, two others took place in corridors of government departments, two others in the Café at Portcullis House and three in bars. Recordings from these interviews may well have been distorted or inaudible. I also found that using shorthand meant that any time during the interview that I needed to take notes about the atmosphere, the tone or attitude being used, or events taking place around us, I was able to add these notes as I went along.

A second issue which arose in the interviewing process occurred when two interviewees asked to be interviewed together in order to save time. Both interviewees were vitally important to my research and so refusing this was not an option. I was however concerned about one interviewee dominating the other (as discussed by Jordan et al, 1992) and a possibility of friction or disagreement between the interviewees. I was also concerned that the presence of a colleague may have meant the respondents felt inclined to give a "socially desirable" response or omit relevant information to please the other interviewee (Bradburn, 1983). I was fortunate however in that the interviewees were close colleagues from the same news organisation and seemed to think along very similar lines so neither the friction, nor the dominance of which I was concerned, occurred. In

the process, two specific advantages of joint interviewing became clear. The structure meant there was an established rapport and an atmosphere of confidence (as discussed by Edgell, 1980) and they also seemed to provide more complex data as the interviewees worked to fill in any gaps they found in each others' memories.

A further issue involved an interview which needed to be conducted over email as the interviewee had already had to cancel twice. Selwyn and Robson (1998) discuss how this method provides low administration costs, readily transcribed interviews and an easy friendliness but it is constrained by its limited and biased population of users (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). In this instance the concerns over biased population are not applicable as all those interviewed rely on email on a daily basis for their jobs. The two problems I did find however was that the interview ended up being much shorter than any others and it was difficult to get the interviewee to back up, give examples or clarify any of their answers. I was also concerned that the lack of rapid response would mean that answers, whilst more carefully thought out, would be less candid and raw. The more time you give a communications professional to answer a question, the greater the potential of the answers becoming more polished and less frank.

Finally I had to contend with general events taking place in the political world at the time of my interviews. My research was conducted between June and October 2003. At this time, the main political event taking place was the Hutton inquiry, conducted to investigate the reasons behind the suicide of Dr David Kelly. This inquiry focused all those in the Westminster Village intently on the issues surrounding spin, political reporting and the role of political PRs and journalists in democracy. I was concerned that whilst the focus meant that all interviewees had been thinking about the subject recently and so had lots to say on the areas I was researching, it also meant that perhaps they were looking at the issue from too wide a perspective and not applying my questions specifically to their own experience.

A further implication of the focus in the Westminster Village on the Hutton enquiry forced me into a quandary about how to complete my research. As part of the Hutton enquiry, and in the spirit of openness on which the enquiry was founded, a huge amount of evidence which would not normally be released which was remarkable in its extent, entirety and level of secrecy. Fear emanated around Whitehall at the time as civil service press officers, special advisors and party communication staffs realised that email was not private, that all their memos were recorded and that they should not send incriminating or incendiary information electronically. The scale of the evidence collected was immense and for a researcher using third party evidence, provided more and deeper levels of information than they could have ever dreamed off. This, however, was the problem for me. I had been unable to interview many of those involved in the Hutton enquiry (for obvious reasons) and so the information garnered would not tie in with the specific interviewees I

was speaking to nor match the specific methodology (which had been chosen for a reason) so I decided to remain with my methodology for this project. This is not to say that the issue of the Hutton inquiry was excluded from my research. Many interviewees did discuss Hutton and its implications for the political news industry and much of what was said was interesting, relevant and provided examples for my questions. However I had to stick to my decision not to utilise it as a third party resource. I did think it was important to understand what had gone on during the Hutton inquiry, so I studied what had happened so that I could ensure I understood and appreciated exactly what my interviewees were saying.

A final issue was how to ensure accuracy in the information which was being provided during the interviews. As discussed in 4.4.1, I had to trade off the problems of granting anonymity (to guarantee interviews) against the opportunities for interviewees to stretch the truth in order to make their own position, or the position of their industry, look more positive. One way I used to help me identify if I was being given false information was to research as much as possible about the interviewee in advance of the interview. I conducted a Lexis Nexis search of each person (to read articles they had either written or those in which they had been written about), a general internet search and used books such as Vacher Dods and Who's Who. These gave me a background to the person, a potted biography and information on how well respected they were. A further tactic I used was to link any information they gave me during the interview with the event they had discussed to make sure their side of the story either fitted in with or had close links to official versions. For example, one interviewee talked about how they had swayed the coverage of an event by contacting specific journalists. I was able to search back to the newspapers published the day after the event and confirm who had covered the story. This retracing was possible with at least half of my interviewees.

4.4.3 Atmosphere and tone during interviews

The atmosphere of each interview was very different. Those commentators who have written on this subject (from whichever group: journalist, politician or political PRs) either in the press or in their own books, talked to me like a co-conspirator, sharing their views and theories on the subject, furnishing me with their 'insider' stories and setting out their perspectives on the role of political PRs. They (along with journalists) were also happy to use the word 'Spin Doctor', a phrase other groups had concerns with.

When interviewing journalists I found that they felt me to be on their side, as if by studying this subject I was against political PRs and against the pressures and constraints they place upon journalists. I found that the journalists were quite open with me about the political PRs they have

encountered and honest about how they feel they interact, even down to naming the political PRs who, in their eyes, were the worst offenders of spin or unprofessional tactics.

Current special advisors and government press officers were the most defensive group I interviewed. One in particular assumed that I would be attacking his job role and all that this role stood for and answered every question on the defensive. Others were more open but still, I felt, held back from how they might speak to a friend outside of politics about their views on their job role. They all took great offence at being described in the news media as a spin doctor, preferring special advisor, media specialist or political communicator.

The largest group I spoke to were former special advisors or former political party communications staff. This group was quite open in its views and vociferous in its attack on the negativity which is displayed about their type of work. They made the point over and over again that they were spun against by the news media more than anything they did themselves and that they have no way of fixing their reputation because the only way to do that would be to go through the media, a media who would not benefit by assisting them.

Politicians were probably the hardest group to interview because they have variable degrees of contact with the media. Those who were former ministers were able to draw on their experiences with the press. Other MPs only had relationships with their local press so they commented more on their views on the role of special advisors, departmental press officers and the communications staff in the party machines.

I had some concerns before going into the interviews regarding how much to give away about myself to the interviewees. I have worked as both a freelance television journalist (though not as a political specialist) and as a political consultant. Whilst neither of these roles place me in the same sphere as those I wanted to interview, they do mean that I come into contact with many of the potential interviewees on a regular basis through work and also that I speak the same professional language. I decided to be honest about my background. Whilst I realised this may jeopardise some of their frankness, I was hoping it would put them at ease, allow them to be more eloquent in using the terminology of the profession and open up further avenues for interviewing. I was consciously looking for any signs that my double role affected their attitudes, responses towards me or any rapport which was built up. I was not aware of anything in particular but I am aware that my close relationship with the industry would mean that I may overlook issues because I am too used to seeing them. This would mean that I would miss issues or points made in the interviews because I was too close to the story.

4.4.4 Post interview follow up

Following each interview I typed the shorthand notes immediately. I also emailed every interviewee the day after the interview to thank them for taking the time to meet with me and to remind them about any further information they had promised to send me. Many replied with information and most offered further contact if I had any other questions. Some in their replies also suggested other possible interviewees and included contact numbers or email addresses for them. This was essential in gaining interviews with some people who receive many requests for interviews and ensuring my request stood out. This snowballing also helped me reach people who were freelance or retired and did not have publicly available contact details.

4.5 **Conclusion**

The approach chosen to consider my research questions was to conduct extensive interviewing amongst politicians, journalists and political PRs. The interviews conducted with each group were similar in order to maximise the opportunities for comparison and all used a semi-structured format to accommodate the communication skills of the interviewees. The interview guides were piloted before use.

The main difficulties encountered involved access to elites, trust and confidentiality. Once the actual interviews were set up I encountered problems with interviewees rearranging interviews so that I either had to cancel them or conduct them either via email or as joint interviews. I also found I had a lack of controllable environment in which to interview. Finally I had to contend with the prevalence of the Hutton report during the time of the research period. My biggest regret is perhaps covering too much. I find the subject so fascinating it is difficult to whittle questions down to specifics. As those I interviewed are also so intricately involved in the subject, both professionally and personally by the very nature of their job, they also seem to find the subject fascinating and it can become difficult to ensure focus on specific questions.

Despite the weaknesses described above I found the research to be incredibly fruitful. I found that interviewing such enthusiastic respondents meant the whole process was enjoyable and worthwhile. To talk to people who truly care about the relationships I was researching was humbling and honouring and all interviewees were interested in what I had already learnt. I truly felt I was speaking to world class experts and I am sure some of this at least this was due to the numerous methods used for finding respondents; the tailored letters, snowballing, stalking, opportunistic sampling and utilising networking opportunities. Kvale and Thomas' texts on interviewing elites were useful for ensuring that I went into the field fully prepared for interviewing. Following their tips about the depths of knowledge which needed to be acquired in

general (Kvale, 1996) and specifically about each individual interviewee (Thomas, 1995) meant that I could ensure that each question from the interview guide could be moulded to fit the person being questioned.

The method used was, on reflection, the correct one for my research questions. I was able to maximise the advantages of the semi-structured interviews; the focus, the depth and the opportunity to investigate two areas of the interviewees' expertise: their knowledge and their opinions. The interview process allowed me to take as much or as little lead as necessary in the interview, to push the questions in the most fruitful direction and to gain valuable research materials.

CHAPTER FIVE - THE MODERN NEWS MEDIA

The purpose of this section is to examine the outcomes of my research, discuss the analysis of my interviews and to place them in context against previous findings. I want to establish the main elements of the news media in the early 21st century and consider how these elements characterise the news media and affect the political journalists working within it.

Research question: How have changes in the news media industry affected the working lives of political journalists?

Aim: To access the changes in the news media industry since Tunstall's 1970 research.

Aim: To access the effect the changes in the news media industry have had on the journalists working within it.

The previous findings of most importance are those put forward by Tunstall in his 1970 book, *The Westminster Lobby Correspondents*. He used questionnaires and interviews to capture the day-to-day working lives of political journalists, specifically the members of the Lobby. He uncovered the hours they worked, the sources they used and discussed the organisational constraints under which they worked (for a further discussion of Tunstall's research on the Lobby Correspondents see 3.5.5). Tunstall's work is now a seminal text in the study of political journalism but changes in the two industries in which they work, i.e. the news media generally and the political news industry specifically, mean that it is now outdated.

My research was not designed to update Tunstall's statistical characterisation of the 1970 political journalist. Whilst there is an interesting research project to be carried out considering the backgrounds of political journalists and assessing them, as Tunstall did, looking at their average age, time in lobby, university background and average hours, this thesis is more interested in their relationships. The interesting part of Tunstall's research for this thesis was not how many lobby correspondents there were, or where they grew up, studied or lived. It was how they interacted with those they were writing about,¹ who their sources were and how they worked with these sources.

The interviewees quoted in this chapter are from all three groups interviewed: political PRs, politicians and journalists. The views of the journalists interviewed are obviously vital in order to

¹ I was also concerned that with more than double the number (214 being registered in 2006 compared to Tunstall's 100) of Lobby Correspondents that there would be time limits on a full analysis.

understand their day-to-day working lives but, by also utilising the ideas and perspectives of those observing the work of journalists; the political PRs and the politicians, I aim to add depth to the research. Before carrying out the interviews, I expected to find that the analysis would involve a consideration and comparison of the views of one group against another. In this chapter however that has not been necessary because the views from all groups were, on the whole, very similar. Whilst all interviewees experience the modern news media from different perspectives they all had remarkably analogous views on the changes which have taken place and were close in their descriptions of the characteristics of the modern news media.

5.1 Introduction

Tunstall's research is now out of date as a result of the significant changes in the news media which have had a huge effect on those working within the system. The first aim of this chapter is to identify these changes. There are numerous researchers who have considered the status of the modern news media and I have drawn upon them extensively to back up the views I was given in my interviews. Of particular significance I have drawn upon the works of MacGregor 1997, Riddell 1998, Chalaby 1998, McNair 1999, Scammell 2000 & 2001, Barnett & Gaber 2001, Curran & Seaton 2003 and Hargreaves 2003. They have all provided plentiful examples to support my conclusions that there are five significant elements of the news media today.

The second aim of this chapter is to consider the effect of these changes on the news media, discuss how they characterise it and to deliberate upon how they affect the journalists working in the modern news media environment. In these sections I will be focusing upon the materials gathered during my own research however the works of Davis 2002 & 2003, Franklin 1994, Jones 1995 & 1999, Cockerell et al 1984 and Norris et al 1999 proved particularly relevant and deserve acknowledgment.

5.2 The modern news media

The news media are a very different animal today than at the time of Tunstall's study in 1970. In fact, they are an entirely different species. The genetic make-up is recognisable yet the look and characteristics and the ways in which they work most certainly belong to a substantially developed variety. Whilst Tunstall charted changes in the political news media from the early 20th century (also see Chalaby, 1998: 71-126), noting differences in the reporting of speeches, the growth of Downing Street briefings and the acceptance of the news media in the Commons (Tunstall, 1970: 4-6), the changes evident since the publishing of his study to the present time seem far greater (for more on this see chapter three).

In interviews with those working in the political news industry; the politicians, the political PRs and the political journalists, five important elements stuck out as being strong characteristics of the modern news media which make it significantly distinct from the media as observed by Tunstall in the UK 35 years ago. These elements are:

1. 24-hour news channels
2. Proliferation of channels and publications
3. Growth and increased use of technology
4. Media owners intentions now focusing on business rather than political gain
5. A general tabloidisation of the news media.

Many of these issues have been discussed in academic literature surrounding the news media and were all highlighted many times over in my own research by members of all the groups I interviewed. I did not ask a specific question on the state of the modern news media yet almost every interviewee had a point to make on how they see the modern news media and how the elements of this new news media significantly affect the rest of the political news industry. Considered as a whole, these elements, caused by changes which were described by one politician as a mixture of “evolution and transformation” (P5), provide a clear picture of the news media in the UK in the early 21st century.

24-hour news channels

Non-news time no longer exists. With the correct equipment (in the form of a satellite dish, cable connection or wireless internet link) anyone in the UK can watch or read ‘news’ at whatever time of the day or night they want. The news media now work constantly, without interruption, for 24-hours. As two respondents put it:

The most significant factor and change...is the growth of 24-hour news...News is new and that has been sped up 100 fold by 24-hour news. Used to be a cycle which was a great deal more leisurely than it is now...There used to be something magisterial about the news at nine o'clock and that was the news till nine o'clock the next day. Now everyone is aiming to get onto the news agenda. (J4)

We have a 24-hour savvy media which will pick up everything. (SA6)

My interviewees were acutely aware that there is a constant, never-ending flow of news being disseminated. The 24-hour news channel, as invented by Ted Turner with the launch of CNN in 1980, has come of age (Cramer, 2003) and news is now a “continuous 24-hour a day phenomenon” (Riddell, 1998: 10). The development of 24-hour news channels has had a huge

impact on the modern media landscape². At the most basic level it means the news market has expanded significantly (Scammell, 2001: 513-4). At a deeper level it has increased the speed of information dissemination, changed the cycle of newsgathering and altered the relationships between journalists and their sources. There is now a continuous cycle of each group reacting to each other with little time for reflection or planning between onslaughts. This has even changed the organizational and logistical structure of news gathering making possible politicians' frequent appearances. A studio facility in Westminster, across the road from the Houses of Parliament at 4 Millbank, feeds the need for political stories and maximises opportunities for politicians to appear on traditional and 24-hour news channels.

The most significant outcome of this change is that, in order to fill the expanded news space created, there was a significant increase in the kinds of political news programmes on which politicians could appear on: breakfast shows, phone-ins or the Sunday 'sofa' shows. One journalist talking about the BBC said:

It has changed quite a lot due to 24-hour news too. There is now so much time to fill that you see more things. (J2)

There is a far larger amount of time to fill and yet still only a limited amount of stories which will be considered newsworthy. This has led to stories being extended, discussed and analysed in much greater depth (discussed in section 5.3.1.1):

In the past, press could examine views but now are confined to examining different interpretations. (P6)

Views like this have led to accusations that political journalists use the 24-hour culture to draw attention to themselves and give a sense that stories are all in the fast lane, everything being "a scandal, everything is a controversy" (Campbell, 2000c: 6-15). BBC Political Editor, Andrew Marr disputes this saying 24-hour news is being used as "an all purpose whipping boy, blamed for the gush and glitter of modern news and that an impatient news culture has always been in place (Marr, 2004).

Proliferation of dissemination channels

The invention of the internet, and the growth of other communications devices, has led to a massive increase in the number of channels available for dissemination of news³. It is argued that the traditional sources of news have crumbled and lost much of their previous stature and

² For detailed discussions on the growth of the news channels see McNair (1999: 69) and MacGregor (1997: 17).

³ For a full analysis of the growth of the media see Scammell (2000: 171-184) and Barnett & Gaber (2001: 6).

importance and they face growing “competition from information genres like talk radio, online chat rooms, 24-hour satellite news channels and customised news reports delivered by e-mail and website” (Entman & Herbst, 1998: 23).

There is now a diffusion of the media which is relatively new. The life cycle of stories is now very short and there are so many more outlets. (PC1)

There are more outlets for news than any other country and these need huge resources to cover them all and this is impossible to manage. (PC6)

The statistics on the growth of the media to back up these views are impressive:

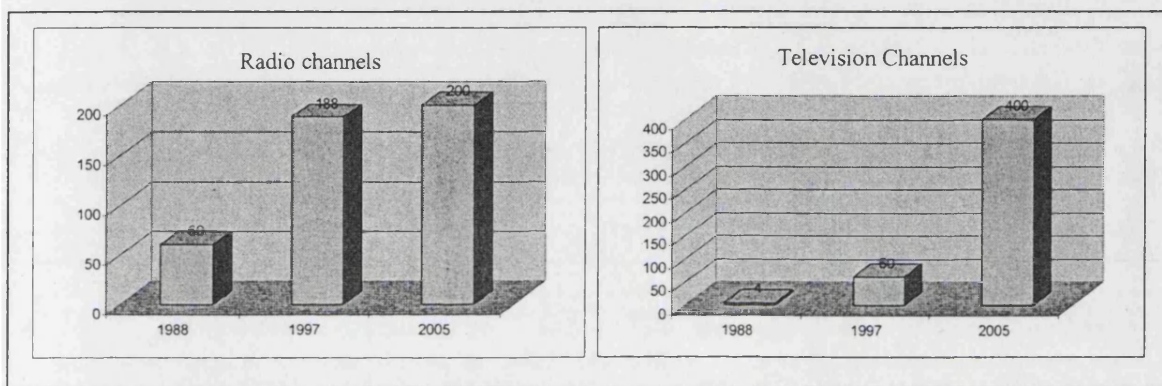


Chart 5a: Growth of radio and television channels: 1988 – 2005⁴

The Government News Network has calculated that in 2005 it had to provide services to over 60 TV News Programmes, 200 local radio stations, 120 regional daily and evening papers and over 1200 weeklies. On top of this there are national, trade and specialist press. In 1988, web pages did not exist, in 1997 it was calculated that there were 132 million (Scammell, 2000: 169) and in May 2005, Google had over 8 billion pages indexed. This expanded media output (much of which is used for news) means that the news can now be considered plural, coming in many variants: broadsheet and tabloid, rolling and fixed-point, global and local, public service and commercial, specialist and general, live and recorded, delivered by cable, satellite, the internet and over airwaves. Known as ‘ambient news’ (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002), this sees news being available from many different sources throughout the day. It can be “gathered by one organisation, packaged by a second and transmitted by a third” (MacGregor, 1997: 24). Respondents overwhelmingly agreed with this view though had contrasting standpoints on whether it was a positive or negative change.

In the UK we have more newspapers and more media and we are at the cutting edge. (J3)

⁴ Statistics from Scammell (2006: 169) and Government News Network.

There are too many papers in the country. (P6)

The presence of these numerous channels has led to an intensification of the ratings battles (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 6-7). This, it is claimed, has resulted in a bending of the rules, reduced reliability of facts within publications (as there is a lack of time for journalists to check them), increasing audience fragmentation (as they are more widely spread amongst all channels), signs of the news media becoming its own challenger and the decline in importance of specific agenda setting vehicles.

Growth and increased use of technology

The growth and increased use of technology in the UK newsroom has been so extensive that, whilst a journalist in Tunstall's study in 1970 may still recognise their beat and the types of stories covered, they would have great difficulty in recognising the layout of their former newsroom and the physical tools they would now use to do their job. The technology used by one of the journalists Tunstall interviewed would have extended little further than an analogue phone, typewriter, wire printer and possibly a telex machine. The journalist of 2006 has a digital phone on their desk, a mobile phone and a blackberry in their pocket, a mobex number (which can find them on whichever phone they are using), a fax, laptop computer (often with a wireless broadband connection) and a handheld computer for contacts and diary dates. They will have the wires fed directly into their computer from the news agencies and a TV on their desk relaying, often live, pictures, directly from news events.

With the Internet they can get information from more sources. 20 years ago there were four TV channels and the broadsheets. Now there is a massive amount of news coverage and Internet. (P3)

Political journalists can watch proceedings from the floor of the Commons without leaving their desk, check Hansard through the Internet, receive departmental press releases over email and interview politicians over videophone or instant messaging. This growth (and further examples can be found in MacGregor, 1997: 2-18) not only fuels the rise in the number of channels for news dissemination, but also allows for increased outlets to receive the same news and, as a result, creates a circular industry where the news media feed off each other, whether by making news for themselves, taking it from their rival media organisations or by encouraging journalists to write stories about stories. It also provides specific problems for journalists as described by this political PR:

With technology, any exclusive is now old after the first editions have come out so nothing is exclusive for very long. Technology means what is wrong can be changed

very quickly so the politicians' ability to be trade stories has been cut massively and as they are so short lived, trading is difficult. Used to be able to trade but now cannot. (PC6)

This implies that even though the day-to-day working life of a journalist is helped by the increased use of technology, it has also meant that some of their traditional tools of self promotion (their full contact book or ability to gain exclusives) have been curtailed. As journalists no longer even have to wait in the Lobby to meet MPs and ministers, their face-to-face contact has diminished whilst their technologically assisted contact (usually directly with the politicians PRs) has increased.

5.2.4 Media owners buy for business rather than political objectives

A more long-term change, but one which has a significant impact upon the content and editorial direction of publications or stations, is the reason for owning a media company. It was traditional in the past for media owners to purchase news media companies in order to further their political ambitions. The press barons (as they were known till the 1970s) were after political advantage, a hand in policy direction and a seat in the Lords. They "sought to use their papers, not as levers of power within the political parties, but as instruments of power against the political parties" (Curran & Seaton, 2003: 58). This is no longer the case and the trend depicted by my respondents was that they now buy media companies in order to provide a platform from which to advance their business interests.

The business was a rich man's toy. Now it is more picked up by vested interests. (PR2)

Rupert Murdoch's media empire is the biggest example of this and it has been said that "Rupert Murdoch will never let his commercial interests take second place to anything" (Bell, 2003). Respondents interviewed strongly followed this view:

The Beaverbrooks wanted political power, the Murdochs want business power – and use the media to manipulate politics to gain that business power. (PR2)

Murdoch went over to Blair, not for ideological reasons, but for commercial advantage. He wanted to be with a winner. (PO1)

Business interests can still impact upon the political direction of a paper but it is a political direction to enable a business opportunity or close down a threat against their licence to operate that sets the direction. An example of this is Murdoch's attitude towards the Euro, which saw his political stance being set by what would benefit his business interests most.

This has significant implications for the news departments within media companies as they may sense a necessity to tiptoe around an owner's other business interests.⁵ It also effects staffing as it means that the typical news media boss is likely "to be a professional manager, working in a corporate setting, and increasingly that corporate setting will entail involvement in a wide range of media from the Internet to movies spread across many parts of the world" (Hargreaves, 2003: 142). This change in direction for media owners means that many media organisations have grown into large corporations and that many news media organisations have become big, globalised and multi-outlet businesses.

This trend towards news media organisations becoming globalised and multi-outlet businesses has significant potential implications for the news media industry in general and for the journalists working within them significantly. The model has four significant pressure points upon journalists working within conglomerates.

Firstly, they have to adapt and upskill to produce news for many different formats: broadcast (radio and television), print, internet and podcasting.

Secondly, there is more promotion across media channels and the public are picking up on this. An Ofcom study in 2004 found that over a quarter (28%) of the public interviewed believed there is too much promotion of channels' other programmes on news bulletins.

A third major issue, and one which is particularly worrying for media democracy scholars, is that where cross media ownership exists, promotion occurs across formats and other channels, not just within one. Journalists must take note of the content of that material where it has an impact upon the other companies in that media or general business group for two reasons. They must keep their employer happy, but they must also ensure they remain impartial and trusted by the public. CBS journalists work ultimately for Viacom and have to take into account the other news channels, entertainment channels, radio stations and advertising arms. Financial Times journalists ultimately work for Pearson who also own a publishing company (Penguin) and Education Companies (Pearson Education). Both these news organisations must ensure they distance themselves from their owners when covering stories on their sister businesses in order to maintain autonomy, credibility and objectivity. However, writing negatively against your ultimate employer must put considerable pressure on journalists. A news media proprietor, keen to run their business well, will be intent on making sure each element of his empire helps the other parts. Business tactics such as cross channel promotions, tie in, advertising, marketing will all be used to ensure media owners get the most out of their businesses. In response, some journalists have been accused of sinking

⁵ For more on this see McChesney (1997).

under pressure from proprietors and either dropping stories or avoiding overseeing certain areas entirely.

Finally, globalisation has had a dramatic impact upon the news media. Not only does the news media facilitate the growth and speed of news around the world it can also be controlled from around the world. The issues raised in Chapter two regarding the controls over the news media by the elites in society can be replicated many times over in a globalised world with controls coming from elites in the global society. This can create a homogenised news media, with a very small group of people or conglomerates in control of the messages, agendas and content being portrayed by the organisation.

Tabloidisation

The speed of news and the pressures of competition have lead to a process of tabloidisation⁶ within the media and accusations that journalism is “sacrificing accuracy for speed, purposeful investigation for cheap intrusion and reliability for entertainment” (Hargreaves, 2003: 12). Tabloidisation as a process finds that television news is moving the way of newspaper news, with more comment and speculation and fewer sources and standards. News organisations, operating in an increasingly competitive market, have fought to raise productivity and maintain audience share by cutting editorial budgets and popularizing news content (Davis, 2003: 671). This is highlighted in the simplification of stories and content, a trend towards only putting two sides to every story (pushing out third or parallel parties), a lack of clarity between comment and news and the over analysis of stories, playing on a focus of reporting decisions rather than details.

It is easier with this media to give decisions rather than details. (PC4)

There are varying views on the effects of this move towards tabloidisation. Hargreaves thinks it is a positive process showing that journalism “is diversifying to an unprecedented health and influence” and can be seen as an extension of its reach rather than a “diminution of its ambition” (Hargreaves, 2003: 22). Backing this up, one journalist interviewed talked about the BBC saying:

It is now riskier and they are allowed to know more and be more honest. (J2)

Chalaby however is more negative, calling the process ‘depoliticization’ (Chalaby, 1998: 106-7). He says that whilst it is not new (arguing it is part of a process which has been going on since the 1880s) the focus of political coverage has shifted from issues raised by politicians to aspects of the

⁶ The term ‘tabloidisation’ here does not refer to the growth of what is known as the tabloid newspapers (further information on this can be found in Chalaby (1998: 102-106) or the resizing of several broadsheets (The Independent and The Times) but rather a view that the broadsheets are moving their values and standards towards those of the tabloid papers in an effort to increase their popularity.

political game where “political reporting concentrates on individuals rather than on processes” (Chalaby, 1998: 109). This is also reflected in Swanson’s analysis of US media, where he says there is a movement away from serious political reporting to more audience (or more cynically, ratings) friendly campaign reporting involving personality clashes and horse-race politics (Swanson, 1997). It was a common view amongst my interviewees that this is also now the case in the UK.

Journalists constantly have to strive to find newer and newer stories. So to fill this gap they end up making the news themselves. (PC1)

Journalists love to talk about themselves...They love to talk about the processes of politics rather than the policies or issues. (PC5)

Whatever the arguments on the positivity or negativity of its effects, the growth of tabloidisation was a constant view advocated by media commentators, complaining that there has been a ‘dumbing down’ of the news media.

Issues for journalists in the modern news media

The changes within the media have some strong implications for journalists working in the modern news media in the UK:

1. A new era of news media competitiveness which has grown up in reaction to all the changes described above.
2. A pressurised and complex working environment for journalists as a result of the introduction of 24-hour news, the growth of technology and the proliferation of dissemination channels.
3. A news media with a negative image in society caused by the change in motives by media owners, fragmentation of audiences (resulting from an increased number of channels), the growth in technology and a general tabloidisation of the news media.

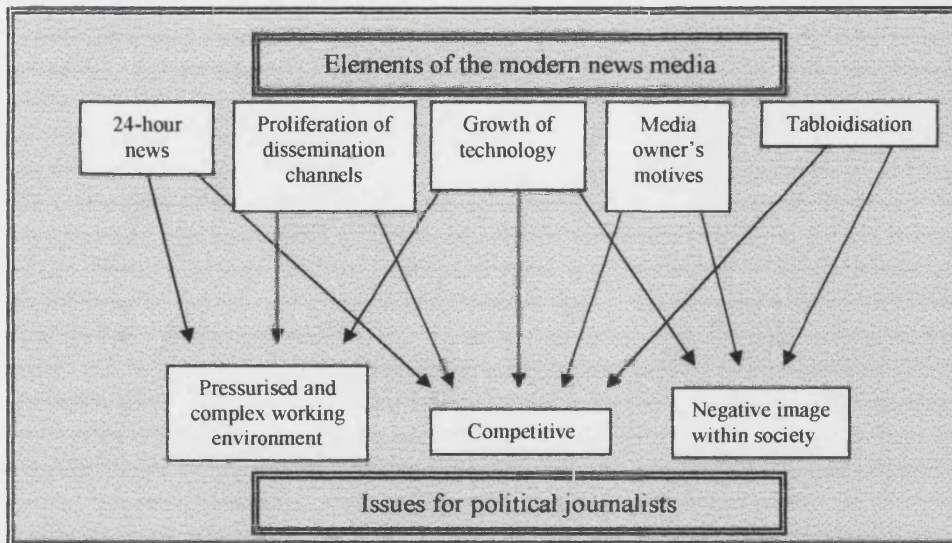


Chart 5b: The elements of the news media and resulting issues for political journalist, J Perry.

5.3.1 Competitive

Competition within the news media has increased immensely due to the proliferation of news outlets, the development of new technologies in which to gather, produce and disseminate news, the fact that owners are now focused on achieving economically profitable outcomes from their news organisations and the tabloidisation of news stories. This increased competition affects the news organisations as a whole just as much as it does the news journalists individually as even within news organisations, camaraderie has fallen and now ‘chinese walls’ have sprung up inside media organisations as each programme or desk competes for their own stories, exclusives, sources and interviewees. An inevitable outcome of this is ‘centrifugal diversification,’ a reduced size of the mass audience and a facilitation of the diversification of political communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1999: 221). As the number of news programmes increases, the share of audience for each one potentially decreases causing significant fragmentation. Ofcom figures state that audiences for the main five channels have declined by 6% over the past ten years and viewing figures for the main evening news programmes are down by more than 10%.⁷ This was highlighted by one political PR:

The journalists are struggling against falling audiences. (PC5)

This means there is now significantly more competition between news media companies and news programmes than ever before. In this “fragmented media environment, with more choices available at a click of the remote, public loyalty towards particular media outlets has eroded”

⁷ http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb/psb/volume2/social_values/informed_democracy/news#content (as viewed 31/12/06).

(Norris et al, 1999: 84). Even traditionally untouchable programmes (known as the 'agenda setting vehicles') like Today and the Nine o'clock News (and now the Ten o'clock News which has replaced it) are seen by some to have less stature than they used to. As one respondent stated:

Today is only listened to by 600,000 people and they are all in the village. It had more influence in Margaret Thatcher's day as it was used by MPs to debate, but it is not used in that way any more. Today has become a caricature of itself. They only care about competing against Newsnight. (PC6)

There is a decline in political coverage. For minority audiences there is a still lot of politics so those who are interested, they are well catered for. Politics for the masses is falling. (P1)

The increased competition has caused large waves to roll throughout media organisations affecting many areas but in particular establishing a trend for media organisations to become insular and develop increased hunger for exclusives.

5.3.1.1 Competition encourages journalists to write 'stories about stories'

The growth in competition in the news media industry has led to journalists being forced to refer to news from other media organisations. When there were only three or four main bulletins a day, it was possible for a minister to give an interview to all bulletins. The exponential growth of outlets means that now they may well restrict their time to one main news organisation or agency and the others may have to take from this. Many of my interviewees mentioned this trait.

Newspapers now have to write stuff such as 'according to the Guardian' which they hate doing. They have to feed off each other. (PC6)

The Evening Standard takes lines from Today. (J7)

Tunstall's later research also supports this stating that "in terms of simple coverage, both television networks and individual producers are highly dependent on the press" (Tunstall, 1996: 186). As discussed in 5.2.1, this has led to a further trend towards media organisations writing 'stories about stories'. There becomes a gap between the amount of news which can be published (through increased space which technology use provides) and the news which is available to be published. Rather than spending extra money covering news from further abroad which is costly to gather, it is cheaper for media organisations to develop further angles on the stories they already have. This leads to situations where:

Everybody has the same news. Stories about a story have got longer and more complicated and bits of detail get blown up. (PC6)

There has been a long term deterioration in the atmosphere with everything reported two or three steps along from the real story. There is over analysis, over cynical and over complexity of stories...and this makes politics more remote as it becomes more mediated. (PC1)

These cases of 'stories about stories' either take the form of journalists dissecting how a story was covered after the event, media journalists discussing how a story is likely to be covered or, as in the Hutton enquiry (for more on this see 5.4), not only covering the story extensively but then developing the story to such an extent that journalists ended up evaluating every other journalists coverage of the story.

5.3.1.2 *Competition increases the importance placed upon exclusives*

A further effect of the increased competition on media organisations is that a much greater value is placed upon the numbers of exclusives won.

There becomes a frenzied desire among journalists for the latest story which is most damaging. (P2)

Papers want stories which will put bums on seats which will get coverage and referred to by their rivals. They want to get attention so each journalist must get into that cause. (SA1)

The problem is, due to the speed at which news moves in a 24-hour rolling news society, a story which once would have been exclusive to a newspaper until the papers were published again the next morning, can now be played on Sky News at 6am and be covered on news websites or by BBC Radio only a few minutes later, with confirming sources and often no acknowledgement of their rival's exclusive.

24-hour TV news means nothing is exclusive now...Any exclusive is now old after the first editions have come out so nothing is exclusive for very long. (PC6)

Beyond this, any exclusives which are given are usually done so with the express consent of the government. This makes life easy for news media organisations attempting to beat their rivals but also pushed journalists towards being in cahoots with political PRs.

A newspaper reporter today is judged on how many exclusives they get and the spin doctor has the power to give these out and to give out the information. Information is like a currency and it can be traded. Information would not be given to anybody – it is not given out at news conferences because that would be wasting a trading opportunity. (J3)

This obviously affects the journalist within the organisation in their aim to fulfil their social responsibilities and this drive towards exclusives has had a negative effect upon the idea of detachment and objectivity within the news media. As tabloid values have taken over newsgathering processes, the objective behind exclusives and more general news stories is for journalists to provide confrontation in as many avenues as possible. Politics provides the perfect opportunity for this. Many of the younger, ambitious correspondents have seen that the route to attract attention, and promotion, is by getting 'scandal' and 'split' stories and whilst doing this a sense of proportion and reflection can become lost. This confrontation was highlighted strongly in my study leading to the implication that journalists are now looking for 'stories' rather than news. News can be simple facts or information but a story can be neatly packaged and delivered to an audience over a period of time. One civil service press officer gave an example of this saying that every activity is analysed by the media looking for a story, looking for information to make a story more exciting and newsworthy and as a result the media plays on bad relationships.

If the department says one thing, and the minister says another thing, and the parliamentary office another, there will be stories about splits in the party and disconnection stories. (PO3)

If papers can write split they will – this means we can't do anything which will put this into their hands. (SA1)

Competition pushes for stories to be written in a confrontational way with stories positioned in a two-dimensional polar manner with 'good placed against evil', 'left fighting right.' One interviewee described this perfectly:

There are good verses bad or, anti verses pro, basically black and white stories and it is very hard to get grey into the mix. (PC5)

This has resulted in a situation where journalists feel inclined to squeeze third parties out as two-dimensional stories in the political world means Labour versus Tories. Two former Liberal Democrat communications staff backed this up:

With the Liberal Democrats it was hard to be part of the story at all. (PC5)

At election times we saw Paddy Ashdown's ratings rise because of the fair balance coverage issue. (PC1)

These quotes illustrate a news media hunting for stories in order to gain exclusives (and thus beat their competition) now that the increase in media outlets has grown so significantly.

Pressurised and complex working environment for journalists

The stress of competition has effected the working lives of journalists but this is not the only pressure they have had placed upon them. Their working lives have changed dramatically due to a more complex news media environment under the guise of 24-hour news channels, the proliferation of channels and publications and the growth and increased use of technology.

There is now an increased workload for journalists who have to produce more political coverage for more communication channels with fewer colleagues and less resources. They also have pressures from outside the news room which push them towards taking a self-protectionist attitude. A final element of this characteristic is that the position of the journalist as a professional has to be evaluated in order to consider their role in the media environment and in political life at large.

5.3.2.1 Increased workload for journalists

A major issue in the newly competitive nature of the news media is that the staffing requirements of news organisations have changed significantly. As competition in the news media has risen, the numbers of journalists have decreased. Tunstall (1971) estimated that in 1969 there were about 3,550 journalists working on national newspapers. More recent estimates indicate a drop of between 25 and 31 per cent (Davis, 2002: 5). Alongside this, it has been estimated that between the 1960s and 1990s, the amount of words written by each newspaper journalist at least doubled (Tunstall, 1996: 136). This increase in expected output has changed the journalist's role significantly, especially when we consider it together with the fact that the volume of material which journalists must now follow has massively increased (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 6-7) and raises the pressures upon journalists to increase their work rate. As competition takes its toll on costs, staffing levels diminish and those left are put under increasing pressure to provide more copy and to make it fill more criteria, whether it is an exclusive, more tabloid based, or focused on analysis rather than fact.

Journalists are under so much pressure now. The increased media competition and the amount of media cutbacks mean that journalists are constantly trying to find their own stories and also having to write more copy. (PC1)

One former journalist told me:

Papers have grown in size and the staffs have contracted. Staff journalists now have to provide many more words and have more work published. 30 years ago when I was working on a Sunday paper I had to produce one or two pieces a month of about 2000 words. Now I would be expected to do that one or twice a week...The information also has to be produced faster. (J6)

This doubling of work for the journalist in question must surely have impacted upon their time available to find new story ideas and to accurately and fully research the content upon which their writing relies.

A further problem for journalists arises when media outlets no longer fulfil just one function or occupy one channel. "News media involves a process of evolution in which old media are not replaced by new media, but modified by them" (Hargreaves, 2003: 52). As such, most, if not all, newspapers now have on line editions and many broadcast news departments file stories to radio, television, internet and 24-hour-news channels. This means that now journalists will often have to write for more than one audience, for dissemination in more than one medium. The growth and use of technology means this is possible but it also means staff must be multi-skilled, continually trained to use new equipment or work on new channels and may have to increase their workload significantly to fulfil their organisation's expectations and requirements.

5.3.2.2 Journalists feel need towards self-protectionism

An implication of the changes in the news media is an inclination towards self-protectionism, mostly as a result of the increased competition resulting from the proliferation of channels and the new structure of news media organisations as businesses. This manifests itself in two significant ways. The first is protectionism against spin from outside, developing anti-spin tactics to protect against government manipulation. The second way is to learn self-censorship. Often picked up through osmosis and socialisation rather than any obvious actions, it can prevent a journalist being heavily criticised by their editors. Both ways provide journalists with opportunities to protect themselves against excessive costs, political influence and the wrath of media owners.

The role and relationship that political PRs have with journalists will be discussed in chapter seven but I was told during my research that:

Journalists are standing up to the spin doctors' tactics more now. (J2)

Journalists have had to find ways to counter the spin doctors. You can see a process of action and counter action. It is a cycle. (J4)

Self-censorship in the news media has also increased, according to journalists, since the changes in the media. This is not a case of lying but instead of knowing what to write.

Journalists tend to self-censor when they work for organisations with known political views and so although a certain stance is never dictated, journalists know what they are expected to write. (PC5)

The BBC are self-censoring...we are still susceptible to pressure and standards. (J3)

This self-protection may well come from (as implied here by PC5) the socialisation journalists receive when they begin working for a specific news organisation. The socialisation will surreptitiously teach them what is acceptable to the editor and what will get into print. This is not a new phenomenon; it makes sense on the part of a journalist who wants to see their stories in print or on air and political economists would point out it is simply a result of the business behind news gathering. Even in the 1950s Breed wrote, "we find the publisher does set news policy, and this policy is usually followed by members of his staff," (Breed, 1955: 326) who "learn it by osmosis" (Breed, 1955: 328). This situation then is not one which can be seen as particularly new but it will get worse as news media organisations increase in size, complexity and number of member businesses.

5.3.2.3 *The journalist as a professional*

Journalists have certainly not, in the past, been thought of as professionals along the same lines as doctors or lawyers. Lord Poole, Chairman of the Conservative party under Macmillan, surmised this attitude aptly when saying that lobby correspondents are "very decent fellows, but not quite the sort of people one would invite into one's own home" (Osborne & Walters, 2004: 104). The debate has moved on dramatically since this time however and now it is commonplace to see debates in academia about the issue of the journalist as a professional. One journalist I asked about the way political PRs are perceived even highlighted how political PRs have taken over the unprofessional image journalists used to have.

Political communication has professionalised but compares it unfavourably with other professions such as journalism or medicine where to be a professional means you have a higher standard of training or an authority to admit someone to your profession. (J6)

Hallin states that its comparability with other professions is not that its practice is not based on any systematic body of knowledge but actually on its “ethic of public service” (Hallin, 1992: 15). Soloski (1989) and Larson (1977) state that actually professionalism is just an efficient and economical method by which news organisations control the behaviour of reporters and editors (Soloski, 1989: 207).

There is some formal requirement to take on some elements of professionalism with the Communications Act 2003 setting out a rule that “news included in television and radio services is presented with due impartiality” (Communications Act, 2003: Section 319:2:c). The BBC Producers’ Guidelines also make the case for impartiality by stating: “Due impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC. It is a core value and no area of programming is exempt from it.” Ofcom research suggests that impartiality in news is highly valued by viewers with 95% of their survey respondents calling it important (Ofcom, 2004⁸).

Where news policies are backed up by professionalism, they are able to ensure that certain behaviours are followed which relieves bureaucratic organisations of responsibility for devising their own mechanisms of control in the discretionary areas of work (Larson, 1977: 168). In this way, by highlighting their ‘professional’ status, journalists can blame any unpopularity of their work on ‘objectivity.’ They can claim they are objective and report only facts and thus shift the blame for any mistakes onto their sources and insulate themselves from accusations of unfairness or bias.

It is difficult to analyse if there has been a significant transformation resulting from the changes in the news media because the idea of the journalist as a professional was so disputed even in the 1970s when Tunstall was researching this area. For those following the views of Soloski and Larson, the changes in 24-hour news, the proliferation of channels and the tabloidisation of the news media will all have a significant effect in the professionalism of the journalist. If following Hallin’s view, however, that the professional follows a public service ethic rather than a systematic body of knowledge then the development of media owners running media businesses for profit rather than political advantage will also affect the professionalism of those journalists working for them. These journalists will now have to work for a private corporate outcome rather than a public service objective and could thus be seen to lose their professional and objective status.

⁸ http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb/psb/volume2/social_values/informed_democracy/news#content (as viewed on 31/12/06).

5.3.3 Negative image of news media within society

The news media in society generally has gained a negative image as the fragmentation of audiences, tabloidisation of the news media, the speed of dissemination due to new technologies and again, the increased competition have become stronger in society's mind. This negative image appears to have two main premises:

1. That many judge standards and accuracy to have dropped.
2. That the news media has developed into a political player.

Not surprisingly, it was the political PRs and politicians interviewed who had the strongest and most negative views on the media. One political PR in particular said that:

The media should be questioning. Media must realise it is part of society and they should not ruin society. (PO1)

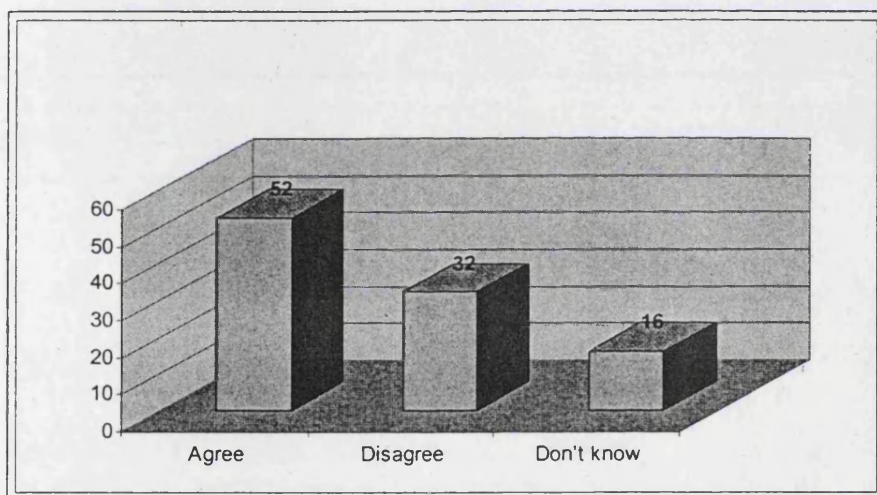


Chart 5c: Levels of those who believe journalism makes a positive contribution to life in Britain.⁹

Only half (52%) of public respondents to an Ofcom survey saw journalists as making a positive contribution to life in Britain. Nearly a third (32%) thought they actually made a negative contribution. My interviewees (including some journalists) were not much more positive and discussed how the media are now also thought to be “spinners,” (SA6) “superficial conspiracy ridden, arrogant,” (PO1) “dishonest,” (J6) “obsessed with process over substance,” (PC1) “unreliable, nasty, sneering” and “politicised, bought and corrupted.” (PO1) This negativity flows through into the area of trust.

⁹ Press Gazette research conducted by You Gov - Jan 2005.

The public does not trust journalists. Does the BBC tell the truth? Do spin doctors tell the truth? ...If you ask the public about 25 professions then journalists and politicians would be found in the bottom five. (P5)

In fact, in 2005, when MORI asked the public about 16 professions,¹⁰ journalists were the least trusted (16%), closely followed by politicians and government ministers (both 20%). Despite even lower levels of trust for all in the 1990s their unpopularity has remained fairly consistent since 1983. As the level of trust falls for one group in the political news industry, so does the level of trust for the others. They are both as distrusted as each other.

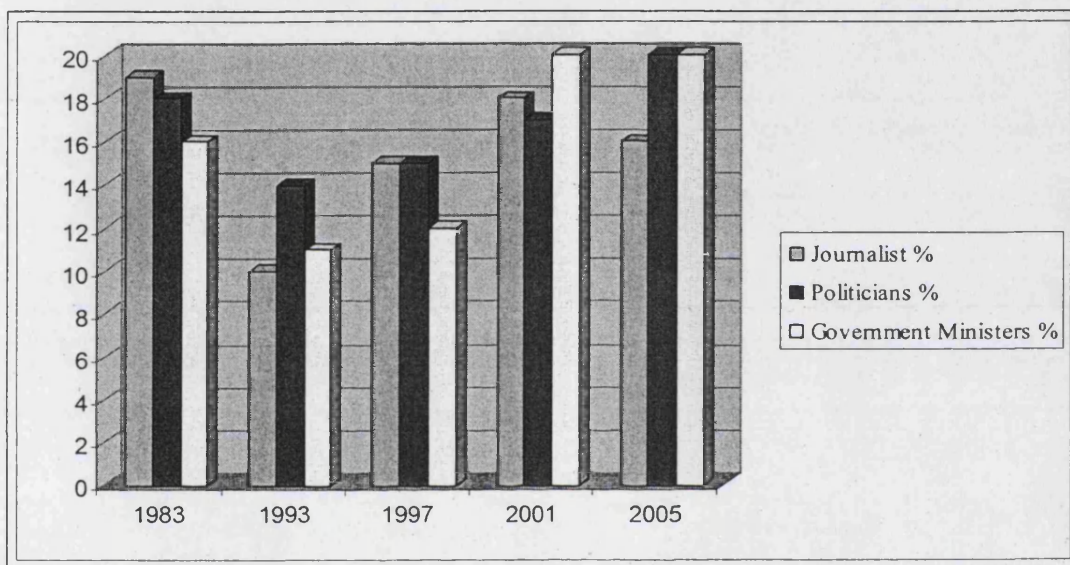


Chart 5d: Levels of trust for journalists, politicians and government ministers.¹¹

For an industry whose core proposition is to 'tell the truth' they are perceived by the public as doing a remarkably poor job. The ingrained lack of trust has grave implications for the news media's position in society.

The audience knows lots of information is dodgy so they end up not trusting anything they read. (J6)

People do not believe now. There is a cynical media and the public are cynical too. (PC4)

¹⁰ Business Leaders, Civil Servants, Clergyman / Priests, Doctors, Government Ministers, Journalists, Judges, The ordinary man / woman in the street, Pollsters, The Police, Politicians generally, Professors, Scientists, Trade Union officials, Television news readers, Teachers.

¹¹ Source: MORI Poll on Trust within society: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/trends/truth.shtml> (as viewed 31/12/06)

This has damaged the industry, and with the public not trusting much of what they read, there is concern over how they are to make decisions regarding their political choices or to be able to vote knowing they have understood a party's policies.

Turnout at the last general election was only 59% and there was a large amount of media coverage for it. The only thing which has changed is the level of trust. Broadcast journalists are trusted much more than newspaper reporters but even their level of trust is going down. (J3)

One interesting point however is that the dissemination format (or channel) of the news they are taking in has a significant impact. My interviewees were clear that broadcast news was considered more positively than newspapers – tabloid newspapers especially:

National tabloid writers are not very highly trusted, however broadcast journalists are much higher trusted and these broadcasters reach a much larger audience – but often the stories they are broadcasting come from the tabloids. (PC5)

This has been backed up by research by the Press Gazette who, in 2005, asked members of the public to name the one newspaper, magazine, broadcast news programme or news web site that they considered to be most trustworthy. A large majority named broadcast news media and despite the (then) recent issues surrounding the Hutton case, the BBC alone took a third of the overall votes.

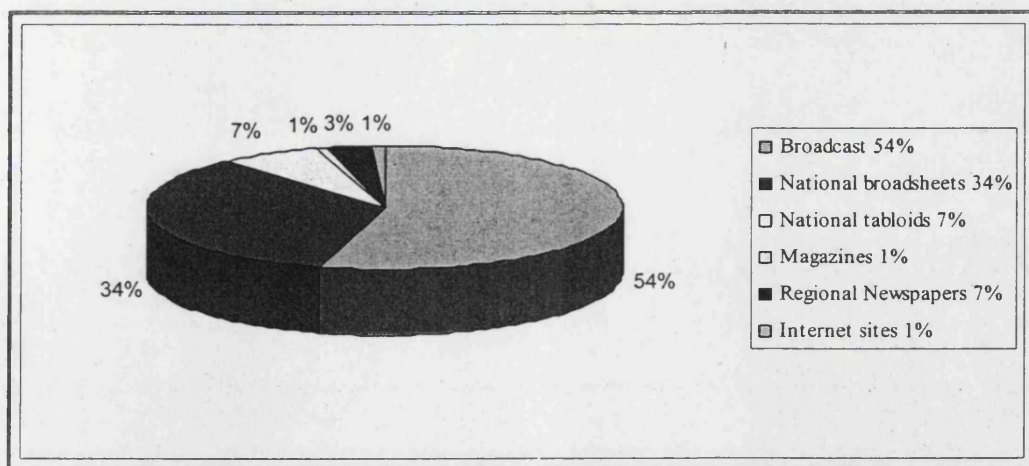


Chart 5e: Format of favoured trustworthy news media.¹²

Until there is a more positive image of the news media as a whole however, and one which audiences feel can be trusted, then journalists are failing in their roles as trusted information providers.

¹² Source: Press Gazette research. <http://www.yougov.com>. (viewed 31/12/06).

5.3.3.1 *Standards and accuracy judged to have dropped*

Three of the changes in the news media; the proliferation of channels, the tabloidisation and the development of 24-hour news channels have all increased competition and thus led to accusations of a lowering of standards within the news media generally. Interviewees from all three groups, journalism, political PR and politics agreed with this viewpoint. A specific complaint was that the increased competition has led to decreasing consistency within publications. One political PR said:

Papers do not have to be consistent but ministers do. Minister's speeches can be considered out of context so we have a penalty in the future for anything we say. The papers don't. (SA1)

There have also been complaints (particularly by politicians) about general sloppiness in the news media caused specifically by the speed at which news stories are expected to be covered in the atmosphere of the increased competition and the amount of file needed to fill the extended news space.

The news headlines are so sloppy. They get things such as GM crops and GM food mixed up. (P2)

Clare Short MP spoke to a fringe meeting at the 2003 Labour Party conference and supported this view saying that there has been a "real decline in last few years of standards and accuracy in all but the FT. There has been a tabloidisation. It is not good enough and it is so sloppy" (Short, 2003). A further, and more concerning viewpoint however (this point shared by all types of interviewees), focused on accusations of an increasing trend towards exaggeration and hyping stories beyond their newsworthiness. A retired journalist admitted in his interview:

I did exaggerate. It is easy to exaggerate in conversation...the standards are worsening, there is more exaggeration and more spoilers...I would speak to one MP and then report it as 'rebel MPs.' (J3)

I was given numerous examples of this type of 'jazzing up' of sources such as claiming a source is a 'senior Labour MP' when actually they were just an older MP or one who has been there for more than four years (SA1). It was pointed out it would be very easy for a journalist to go on the news and say the 'knives are out for Hoon' and yet it could have just come from one old MP on his 19th pint in Strangers Bar" (SA1). This jazzing up can get much more serious however when stories are actually made up. On arriving to interview a political columnist for a national tabloid who was completing his column for the next day I was party to his research which consisted of

asking a fellow columnist “Who do we hate, who shall we stitch up?” They picked a cabinet minister and wrote a diary section stating that the “beleaguered [department] Secretary’s speech to the conference underwhelmed delegates and, according to my sources, he will be out of a job shortly.” The speech had not yet taken place, no advance copies were available and the interviewee later admitted that he never even watched the speech. His source was a junior minister with whom he’d played golf that morning and who would have had no idea on Blair’s cabinet reshuffle plans. (SA2) Whilst I am well aware these journalists may have been ‘performing’ for me to prove that they were powerful, the full piece, word for word, was published the next day. The ‘beleaguered’ cabinet minister survived numerous reshuffles following this piece and still held his position over 18 months later.

There is a tendency to hype and accelerate and they live by shocking and to exaggerate but that is just part of the game. Hype built into the media and that is why they are successful and they have the ear of the people and politicians do not. (P1)

The exaggeration is possible because the historical nature of the lobby is to allow stories and views to go out on an unattributable basis.

It is a culture of unattribution...there is a culture of lobby briefing and unattributable quotes. (J6)

The standard of political journalism has gone down as well because you can now find more and more stories written without attribution. Even The Times has had front page stories with non attribution and this has now spread to broadcast. (J3)

A further reason for this perspective believing that standards and accuracy have dropped is that there are no obviously displayed penalties for political journalists who get stories routinely wrong. The public perception is that journalists simply shrug off their mistakes and move on.

There is no incentive to check things out properly. Journalists often stretching trust and not attributing. If they had to be more meticulous, it would be very time consuming. (J6)

Even the BBC's director of policy and legal affairs has admitted that whilst high standards are aspired to it is not always feasible. She said: “truth and accuracy are the gold standard ... but you don't always achieve it” (Thomson, 2003). An effect of the lowering standards of accuracy, increased use of exaggeration and acceptance of the need for exclusives is that there is a risk of diminished trust by the public for the news media (as seen in chart 5d) and a concern about the ability of the news media to fulfil public interest and social responsibility functions.

The public are picking up on the fact that the gold standard is not always achieved and an Ofcom study in 2004 found that almost a fifth (18%) of the public interviewed believed that television news has been dumbed down to an unacceptable level. On top of this, the same study also found that only half (53%) believed that you can trust the information and analysis provided by British television news to be accurate and impartial (Ofcom, 2004). As we saw in chart 5e, television news is the highest trusted news format so with only 53% of the population trusting this, means there must be far less confidence in the other forms of news media.

The public also hold concerns regarding the types of news content covered. A 2002 study (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002) found a declining public engagement with news issues in general but political issues in particular. The report suggested that news producers are responding to the declining and fragmented audiences by reducing the amount of time devoted to politics by around 20 to 25% compared with the 1970s¹³. They quoted a journalist saying that politics no longer has an automatic place in the news agenda (Ofcom, 2004).

5.3.3.2 *News media organisations become political players*

A significant new role in the news media has come to light following many of the changes. The news media have come to be seen as an unofficial opposition for the government, taking the place of Her Majesty's Official Opposition when they are lacking in strength or support. Whatever the rights or wrongs of this role (which has been debated extensively within the news media and more generally within politics) it has been continually stated that with a considerably weaker opposition party in the Commons since the New Labour landslide of 1997 the only effective opposition to Blair has come from the media, in particular, *The Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*. Numerous media commentators and politicians have said that the "sphere of political debate has moved from Parliament to the media" (Teather, 2004) and that "the main arena of political debate is now the broadcasting studio, not the floor of the Commons" (Riddell, 1998: 8). Pfetsch has described this change saying that it is a case of "the media taking over vital functions of political parties and moving into the centre of the political system and the adaptation of institutions and practices of politics and government to the central role of mass media particularly television" (Pfetsch, 1998: 70).

This is considered to be damaging by Scammell who says this has "downgraded the role of Parliament, treating it as just another communications opportunity... betraying its own promises of freedom of information and open public debate and dialogue" (Scammell, 2001: 510). A more

¹³ See also an earlier study by the University of Westminster (From Callaghan to Kosovo: Changing Trends in British TV News 1975 to 1999) which suggested a trend towards a more tabloid and more domestic agenda.

pragmatic view though (and this one articulated by an MP) says simply that TV is the modern parliament and the modern way of doing politics (Duncan, 2004).

A caveat to the ability of news media organisations to become political players is that it is any politicisation can be greatly effected by events in Parliament itself. When parties are secure in their leadership the news media can have a wider role in political debate. The power of the whips will be weaker and rebellion from backbenchers less newsworthy. The news media in this case can play the role of opposition effectively. Once the ruling party is weaker in their discipline, less sure of a majority and more firmly stood up to by the official opposition, the news media will lose much of their political role and resort to their reporting responsibilities. This view was backed up by one politician interviewed who said that (during the period of a high majority for the Labour government), instead of an opposition:

We have the press instead and the press are taking on the role of the opposition (P1)

This view is also justified by a former cabinet minister who says that in the absence of a decent opposition the government can be dangerous, so a news media who scrutinizes which stories are true is very important (Short, 2003). That the news media should take the role of opposition is not a universal view however and some that I interviewed were incensed by the way it was trying to sell itself as the opposition. One political PR called it “arrogant” and “awe-inspiring” (PC6) and a politician said that “it is not the media’s job to be against anybody” (P2). A special advisor agreed:

It is not the job of the media to be the opposition. It is their job to report that the political opposition are not effective. (SA5)

It is easy to see, with the increased competition and the extra hours of news space to fill, that it makes good business sense for a news media dissemination channel to act as an opposition. It is also understandable however that politicians would be concerned that those acting as this opposition were not elected officials who must fight for their seat every five years but a journalist with far fewer social responsibilities. An emerging view on this issue was provided by a politician who said:

Each newspaper is a party in itself as it reflects its own constituency of readership. (P1)

This more positive idea accepts that the news media has taken on a political role but that that role remains observational rather than powerfully active. This, I would dispute, for numerous ministers have had to resign or be moved as a result of news media pressure (just recently, David Blunkett, Charles Clarke, John Prescott) and anyone watching the way Neil Kinnock was treated when he

was leader of the Labour Party (also showing it is not a necessarily a new development) would state that the news media can be powerful and active.

5.4 Case Study: The dodgy dossier

One way of illustrating the changes in the news media, and the impact they have had on the political journalists working with it, is through highlighting a specific case. The case study I want to use here is one that actually took place during my research (and is highlighted at the start of the introduction to this thesis), the case known as the 'dodgy dossier.'

On the 29th May 2003, BBC Correspondent Andrew Gilligan broadcast a report on the BBC's *Today* programme questioning the accuracy of a dossier published by the government in September 2002 which made the case for Britain to go to war with Iraq. The report took the form of a live two-way and in it, Gilligan said that the government knew that it was using intelligence which was wrong but asked for the dossier to be "sexed up" anyway. The government complained that there was no evidence for this statement and asked for an apology and retraction. Gilligan refused. The BBC backed him and Gilligan stated he had notes from a meeting with his source that confirmed his story. After a hunt for the source; Dr David Kelly, a scientist at the Ministry of Defence, came forward privately to say that he may have been the source of the accusations and his name was eventually confirmed to the media as such. Following massive media interest, Kelly went into hiding and his body was later found after he had taken an overdose. The government asked Lord Hutton to hold an enquiry into what had happened. The resulting investigation, and subsequent report, led to resignations at the BBC and dramatic changes in the way BBC journalism was to be conducted.

The results of Lord Hutton's enquiry are not important for this case study as their validity, accuracy and any bias have been discussed numerous times before and the points raised with regard to the relationships between political PRs and journalists will be covered in chapter seven. What is of relevance, and great interest in the context of this thesis, is how the case illustrates the key elements of the news media, and the way that journalists now work, in the current news media age.

There is now an era of news media competitiveness that has grown up in reaction to the proliferation of news outlets, the development of new technologies in which to gather, produce and disseminate news, the fact that owners are now focused on achieving economically profitable outcomes from their news organisations and the tabloidisation of news stories. All these elements led towards the way the dossier was covered by Andrew Gilligan.

Competition has led to 'chinese walls' springing up inside media organisations with each programme or desk competing for their own stories, exclusives, sources and interviewees. This leads to extra pressures on the journalists working for individual programmes or papers not to share their information, check it with others or run it past too many people in their organisation. Dr Kelly had also given an interview to another BBC journalist (Susan Watts) who would have been able to substantiate or invalidate his claims, yet she worked for a different programme (*Newsnight*) than his (*Today*) so they did not corroborate their information.

The increased competition has led media organisations to develop an increased hunger for exclusives, placing a great value on achieving them. Gilligan was hired by the *Today* programme specifically to find big political exclusives and to bring 'tabloid journalism' to BBC Radio to improve ratings.

Today got into trouble was because Gilligan was acting in the way that newspapers operate. (J1)

The new style journalism did bring more exclusives to *Today* but when ratings rise they tend to have an impact of rules being broken and bringing in lower standards as there is simply less time for journalists to check facts. Gilligan went to air with only one source rather than the usually preferred two.

Like Hutton, why are Number Ten so angry about Gilligan's piece? Because he was behaving like a newspaper journalist not like a BBC journalist. The BBC just said the story was justified – they have not said it was the truth. But that they we told it by a source. The US media are much better at going with two sources. (SA1)

Beyond this, the speed at which information dissemination now occurs and the changed cycle of newsgathering (such as the move to 24 hour news and the increased number of dissemination channels) means that the relationships between journalists and their sources has altered, creating a continuous cycle of each group reacting to each other with little time for reflection or planning between onslaughts. When all this occurs under the strong lights of the media, the onslaughts move faster and faster. Tabloidisation finds news media organisations hosting more comment and speculation and fewer sources and standards. With information running in the fast lane, there is no time to go back and correct or often even check stories. All these elements were seen on that day in May 2003.

The focus of political coverage has shifted from issues raised by politicians to aspects of the political game where "political reporting concentrates on individuals rather than on processes" (Chalaby, 1998: 109). This is also reflected in Swanson's analysis of US media, where he says

there is a movement away from serious political reporting to a more ratings friendly campaign reporting involving personality clashes and horse-race politics (Swanson, 1997). The individuals involved in this case were focused on intensely with *Sky News* going so far as to film a daily re-enactment of the Hutton enquiry with actors playing the central figures.

A further element of this competitiveness is that journalists are encouraged to fill news space cheaply by writing 'stories about stories.' News stories can be extended, discussed continuously and analysed in much greater detail than ever before. Making 'stories about stories' can either take the form of journalists dissecting how a story was covered after the event, media journalists discussing how a story is likely to be covered or developing the story to such an extent that journalists end up evaluating every other journalists coverage of the story. All these elements were present in the way that the Hutton enquiry was covered.

The final issue here is that the growth in competition in the news media industry has led to journalists being forced to refer to news from other media organisations. This was one of the reasons why the government were so incensed about Gilligan's two-way that morning. His was not even a full news story which would be replayed over and over, but it was a snippet of information which many other journalists would hear, follow up on and repeat. The report was broadcast at 6am so it is unlikely that many members of the public would have heard the story. Other news organisations however, monitor the Today programme, and this, in setting the agenda, would have influenced the stories covered by other news programmes and organisations throughout the day potentially making it into a much larger story.

The fact that there is now a pressurised and complex working environment for journalists was strongly highlighted by the information which came out of the 'dodgy dossier' narrative. Each individual journalist now has more stories to cover, more words to write and less time in which to do it. Whilst technology can help with the gathering and crafting of news, there is still an increased workload for journalists. The expectations on the amount of work to be done by a journalist, in this case Gilligan, must surely have impacted upon his ability to fully and accurately research his content and the number of sources he could get.

New technology also made a significant impact on this case and Gilligan's notes were certainly taken in a non-traditional way. His notes from his meeting with Dr Kelly were taken on his PDA, in a version of shorthand no-one else could decipher.

Finally, whatever the rights and wrongs of Gilligan's report that morning, or the subsequent coverage his story further received, the main reason it became such a big story is that news media organisations (when the official opposition are weak) have become political players. Whilst (in a 24 hour, multi-channel situation) it does seem to make good business sense for a news media

dissemination channel to act as an opposition it can incense politicians and their political PRs to fight back. This is something which certainly occurred in this situation. One of my interviewees pointed out the failings of other political players in relation to the growth in power of the news media:

Cabinet - They just rubber-stamp everything. MPs - they are the biggest poodles, they've not scrutinised government in anything except pushing through their manifesto. Opposition is non-existent. Senior civil servants - should keep politics clean but have been steamrollered. Hutton is an example. Media - Done nothing before but now exercising more control. (PO1)

When journalists are acting as a political opposition, and reporting facts that their PRs bitterly dispute, it is not difficult to see why politicians would feel cheated.

5.5 Conclusion

The job of a journalist has changed significantly since the time of Tunstall's study in 1970. There have been specific elements which have ensured this change. Initially, the introduction and growth of 24-hour news channels and the proliferation of channels and publications have had a great effect on competition in the media and have created a vast amount of news media space which requires filling. The growth and increased use of technology has meant that news can be found, gathered, produced and transmitted in entirely new ways and a general tabloidisation of the political news media means that news is gathered and written in a less deferential, more accessible manner. The shift in the objectives of media owners, utilising their media businesses to gain further business leverage rather than political power, has made a huge difference to levels of competition, standards of objectivity and accuracy and journalistic independence.

These changes within the news media have had significant implications for the way political journalists work on a day-to-day basis.

A major issue for journalists is that there is now a new era of news media competitiveness, beyond anything seen before. 24-hour news channels and a proliferation of other news media channels have ensured a wider spread of consumers and thus (for each individual channel) falling audiences. This has ensured that there is now far more emphasis placed upon exclusives. There is also however more media space to fill and this has pressed journalists to provide more analysis, discussion and coverage of stories about stories. This extra analysis and discussion is not necessarily a bad thing however as it facilitates the ideal of opening up political discussions to the public, inviting them to challenge official information and make their own watchdog decisions.

Where it becomes worrying is when the discussion and debate override the actual original information and interfere with the natural direction of stories.

A second issue which has become clear is that there is now a far more pressurised and complex working environment for journalists. This comes as a result of the introduction of 24-hour news, the growth of technology and the proliferation of dissemination channels. These changes in the news media industry have dramatically increased the workload for journalists, intimidated journalists into believing they must protect themselves at all costs and brought into question the debate over whether journalism should be classified as a profession or a trade.

The final issue for journalists is that the news media can be seen in a negative light. This image, caused by the change in motives by media owners, the growth in technology and a general tabloidisation of the news media has diminished trust in journalists by the public, and this has significant implications for the role of journalists within society. Specifically, the negative image seems to have portrayed a news media with lower general standards, lower levels of accuracy, and an ambition to be a political rather than purely an observational animal. Of particular concern with regards to the journalists' democratic role, these judgements do not seem to be only in the minds of the public. Many interviewees (in particular journalists) accepted that they were valid viewpoints.

Many researchers, working from an idealistic perspective, seeing the journalist as the "defender of truth, beauty and light" (said to be from Delane, 1852), would be sorely disappointed after meeting many of my interviewees. The journalists I spoke to were not avoiding acting in this idealistic way for any malicious or deceptive motives, but purely for organisational and logistical reasons. Many of the theoretical ideals of the public (as highlighted in chapter two) do not seem to translate into an operational reality for the journalists working on the ground. The journalists interviewed did not think in terms of their democratic role in the news media, just in terms of the best way to cover a story. Whilst academics discuss the journalist's role in an almost conspiratorial way, finding theory and significance behind the coverage of every news story, as far as journalists' own views are concerned, this is not the situation, they are just doing their job. The impact of the 24-hours news media, the proliferation of channels and the growth of technology has meant that journalists are expected to produce so much copy that they have little time to think outside their immediate role of producing a certain amount of news coverage per day. Images of themselves taking on a role as a watchdog, fulfilling a democratic function, do not belong in their day-to-day vocabulary.

Overall however, the results found here, the elements of the modern news media and the characteristics it now pervades, can update our knowledge of the processes inside the news media since Tunstall's 1970s research in two ways. Firstly, Tunstall's research on the Westminster

Lobby Correspondents took place over 35 years ago. My interviewees are working in a far more diverse and technologically aware news media environment and the ways in which they work now reflect this. Secondly, there are now so many more people involved in the political news industry that there are many more observers of the role and work of political journalists. At the time of Tunstall's research there were only a few special advisors and none who focused solely on media relations. Departmental press officers were much less media savvy, journalists were still verging on deference towards politicians and, as a result, political parties felt they needed to make little effort towards building relationships or working with journalists. The profusion of political PRs and the huge growth of the political public relations industry means that there are now many more people to observe changes in the news media and this means my research can be so much richer. The growth and development of this new side of the political news industry is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX – MODERN POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

The empirical research in this thesis was designed to see whether political journalists are as powerful gatekeepers in political news today as they were during the time when Tunstall conducted his research. In addressing this however, it is essential to acknowledge that, since 1970, a group of people have established themselves as having a significant influence on the news media and the journalists working within it – political PRs. It is thus vital to establish the background of this group, consider how they work and to ascertain the full extent of their powers. This will then provide a thorough backdrop through which to consider (in the next chapter) how their relationships with political journalists work.

The purpose of this section is to examine political public relations' operations. This will be heavily focused on those working in, and on behalf of the government (both ministers and departments), but also those working for the main political parties. I will investigate previous research findings against the normative outcomes of my research, discuss the analysis of my interviews and place the information from my interviewees in context against these previous findings.

Chapter four compared my main findings about the modern news media against the attributes and trends identified in Tunstall's research in 1970. Unfortunately there is no similar text from that period with the same level of gravitas on the role of political PRs. Tunstall used only one chapter of his research on the Lobby Correspondents to look at the role their sources, and beyond this, research in this area was at the time limited. More recently however texts have been written which cover the growth of political PRs, and there is an increasing amount of autoethnographical literature being published and so it is these foundations on which my empirical research will be built. This growth in the amount of autoethnographical literature does not make up for the fact that this area of research is still so new that it is remarkably under-theorised and, as such, very little previous theory based material exists from which to base my research. My contribution then is to provide new material in order to facilitate a conceptualisation of the role of the political PR in the modern political news industry.

The interviewees quoted in this chapter are from all three groups interviewed: political PRs, politicians and journalists. The views of the political PRs interviewed are obviously vital in order to understand their day to day working lives, but the views, ideas and perspectives of those observing their work, the political journalists and politicians, contribute towards the depth of information necessary to understand the working lives of this fairly newly established group of political players.

Surprisingly, like many of the responses regarding the modern news media in which most interviewees agreed with each other, irrespective of their job title, responses regarding political PRs were also often similar. On the issues concerning the growth in the role, visibility and power of political PRs and on the tactics that they use, there was wholehearted agreement. The main areas of contention, as would be expected, revolved around the validity of the growth, the visibility of the political PRs and their level of power.

Research question: How do political organisations incorporate modern news media processes and requirements into their communication organisation, strategy and policies?

Aim: To establish the structure of political public relations.

Aim: To develop a profile of the typical 'political PR' and to identify the main groups of players within political public relations.

Aim: To highlight and illuminate the range and extent of the procedures, tactics and technologies used by political PRs to influence journalists.

6.1 Introduction

Modern political public relations are focused on the news media. The trends and changes identified within the news media (discussed in chapter four) have a huge bearing on the way in which public relations are conducted by political PRs. The three main issues for journalists working in the modern news media are: the competitiveness; their complex and pressurized working environment; and the negativity within society towards the news media. They have had a massive effect with four specific implications involving: (1) changes in the structure of political public relations, (2) an increase in the number and types of political PRs, (3) a spawning of political PRs to develop many more and more focused control tactics and (4) an increase in the importance and power of political PRs.

This chapter will look at each of these elements in turn to establish the structure of modern political public relations, a description of the players involved, a debate about the relationships between those carrying out similar tasks and an illumination of the range and extent of the procedures and tactics used by political PRs to influence journalists. Each element and characteristic discussed and illustrated in chapter five has an impact, as chart 6a highlights.

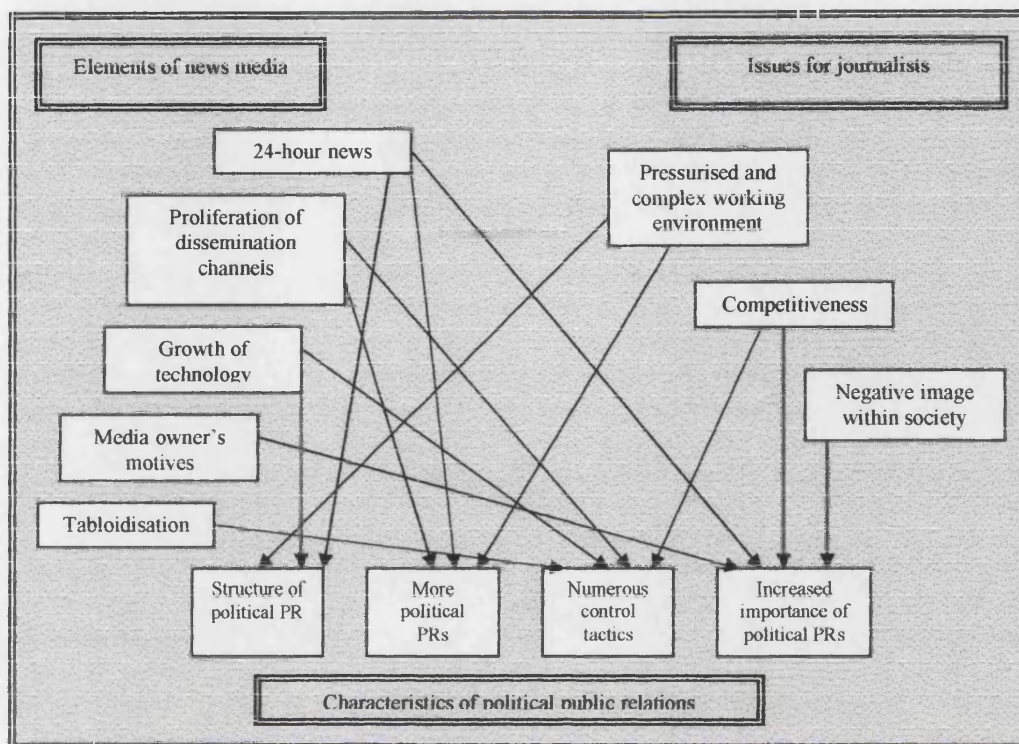


Chart 6a: The characteristics of and influences upon political public relations, J Perry.

Each characteristic of the political public relations industry as identified here will be considered in this chapter, starting by looking at how political organisations structure their communications offerings.

6.2 The structure of modern political PR operations

"The importance of communications to modern government and modern society means that it cannot be approached in an ad hoc or amateur fashion. A culture within Whitehall that accepts and values communication both departmentally and across government is imperative."

(Phillis, 2003)

Those carrying out roles within political public relations work in an intensely different media world than the sources that Tunstall's journalists worked with in the late 1960s. The characteristics of the modern news media have meant that there have needed to be significant changes in the ways political public relations are structured.

The invention of 24 hour news means that there are many more extra hours to fill. This requires more information to be produced and it needs to be produced to an ever increasing number of deadlines. Tony Blair has acknowledged this saying: "In the world of 24 hours a day seven days a week media, a government has got to have a communications operation" (Rawnsley, 2003b: 27).

The pressures imposed by today's 24 hour news services are far more demanding than ever before with many more deadlines than the time when political PRs simply had to meet the late afternoon and early evening edition times of the national newspapers (Jones, 1999: 41). Most press office teams now follow the structure within a newsroom so that they are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and political PRs may even have their own 'beat' as a way of mirroring news organisation's structures effectively.

There are 15 press officers. They are all responsible for their own areas and specialise. We set ourselves up on a newspaper model with a meeting first thing and a 4pm meeting. (PC4)

A further implication of the characteristics of the modern news media is that, due to the increased competition in the news media following the proliferation of channels and publications and the move towards tabloidisation, there is now more power for those who control the flow of information to the journalists, the political PRs (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 6-7). Rolling news services and increased competition have whetted the appetite for a constant diet of fresh stories. This places the political PR in a position to feed the journalistic appetite with advantageous information. This was backed up time and time again during the interviews.

The information also has to be produced faster and so spin doctors are in an ideal position to feed that appetite. (J6)

This appetite is insatiable and all those interviewed who work with, or in press offices, said that there has been a significant increase in the flow of stories, briefings and calls going through their offices. The increased appetite for information and the journalists' need for controversy in order to raise ratings results from 24 hour news, the multiplicity of dissemination channels and the increased competitive news media environment. Political PRs are able to use this situation for their own benefit but must act in a professional manner to do so effectively. The level of this professionalism has caused some controversy.

Spin doctors have got a lot more professional, partly because every professional has and partly demands from the media are so much more. In the 1950's, drunken lunches were as much as media relationships got to. Today's leaders need to be much more aware of the media and accept that it is part of their job. (PC1)

A final important change (as discussed in chapter five) is that media owners' intentions now focus on business rather than political gain. This means it is harder for political patronage to be used as a stick to guarantee positive coverage, or to ensure negative stories are kept out of the press, and so there is a greater need for political PRs. This greater need may explain why the debate around the

political news industry has increased exponentially in recent years and why public knowledge of political PRs has also grown.

Five years ago, to the public, a spin doctor was someone who fixed your washing machine. Now people know what they are. (J5)

They varnish the truth and always have done but more now than there used to be. Labour's biggest mistake was to boast about it. As the saying goes, you can't be a successful poisoner and a famous poisoner and the same goes here with spin doctors. Maybe the change is that spin doctors used to be content with having power in the background and now they want the acknowledgement of possessing that power too. (P2)

Whilst knowledge about political PR has grown it is neither a particularly new nor an outrageous activity. Gould says spin is a longstanding and unexceptional activity which would be used by any sensible high profile organisation (whether political or not) who are under attack. He says "it is common sense to employ people to put the view of the party or the organisation and to do it to best effect. In a modern media environment, competence and good communications are inseparable: you cannot have one without the other" (Hargreaves, 2003: 195). A politician interviewed substantiated this view:

The big public corporations, they would not be expected to talk down their companies whilst they were looking for investment. They, in order to keep their share prices high, expect to say things in the best light. The government should be able to do the same. So the idea of having no spin is absurd. (P5)

This viewpoint, whilst confusing the term 'spin' with 'political communication', portrays a strong attitude that if some groups in society can put forth their own viewpoints why should the government not be able to as well? Why should they be disadvantaged when they may well have to defend themselves against others (in particular large corporations) who can afford to do so in both monetary and ethical terms? The fact that governments do defend their activities through political PR means that, whether it is agreed that it is a good or bad thing, communication has professionalized within politics. It is this professionalisation and the increased importance and power of communications in the news media that makes political PRs an essential group to study. It is essential then to establish who are the political PRs, how they fit into their organisations and what is their *modus operandi*.

6.3 Greater numbers, types and functions of political PRs

Political PRs (for the purposes of this research) come from three groups: (1) departmental civil service press officers, (2) special advisors and (3) those working for the party communications departments. To discover how they work with political journalists it is first necessary to examine their own roles and how they interact with each other.

Political PRs have often been banded into a group labelled 'spin doctors'. The term spin doctor originally came from the USA as an amalgam of the sporting spin (taken from the spin put on a baseball by the pitcher, or the spin put on a cue ball in pool) and doctor (meaning to patch up, piece together and falsify) (Esser et al, 2000: 213). The term is widely disliked within the profession and has now become a term of insult. The NUJ Public Relations council have called it an "inappropriate and offensive" term and others have said that it conveys a great "degree of menace, subterfuge and mystique" (Osborne & Walters, 2004: 106). Only one political PR interviewed was happy with the term spin doctor.

I am proud to be a spin doctor. Spinning is in my blood. (SA2)

Other than that all other interviewees followed the idea that the term spin doctor portrays someone with "neither the subtlety of spin bowlers nor the professionalism of doctors" (Riddell, 1998: 10) and that they are "feared, loathed, venerated or emulated" (Richards, 1998: 7).

It is a phrase I have come to hate. I dislike the term as it is pejorative. In the mid 1990s it was considered to be a fashionable career option but now it means clever and manipulative. Now it is the 'dark arts'...it became more negative. It had turned round. (PR2)

I have been called the grandfather of spin doctoring. I find this an insult. (PC6)

These interviewees were offended to be classed as spin doctors and were unhappy to be labelled as such. In light of this, for the purposes of diplomacy and out of respect for those I am studying, this research labels the group 'political PRs'

Political PR in a recognisable format seems to have been going for just over 100 years (for more on this see chapter three) and for most of the twentieth century it has developed slowly if steadily although there has been considerable growth and dispersion of the industry in the last two decades (Davis, 2002: 1). This growth has been documented extensively¹ and most research in this area

¹ See Ingham (1991), Jones (1995 and 1999), Kavanagh (1995), Scammell (1995), Rosenbuam (1997), Franklin (1997 and 1998) and Schlesinger et al (2001).

has focused on the way the Conservative party introduced a new era where opportunities for political public relations increased exponentially.² Eventually the other parties began to catch up and adopt similar communications personnel and approaches (Davis, 2002: 19). Monetary evidence also shows that there has been a significant increase in expenditure by the Central Office of Information (COI). Scammell highlights the growth from £27 million in 1979 to £150 million in 1988 (Scammell, 1995: 204-6). Cabinet office figures state that total marketing spending since the Labour Party came to power in 1997 trebled, as Chart 6b shows. Others point out that numbers of departmental press officers have practically doubled (Davis, 2002: 21)³.

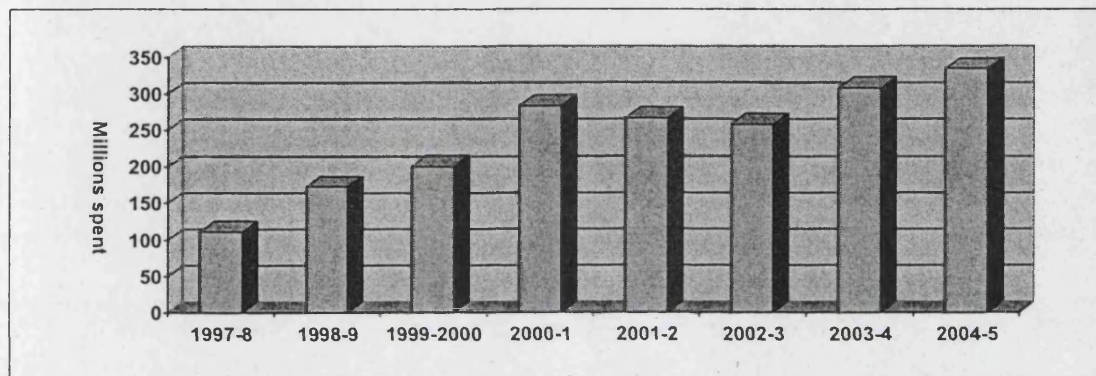


Chart 6b: Government marketing costs. Source: Cabinet office

Political PRs have professional salaries with the average government special advisor in 2006 receiving £69,000⁴. The highest paid government advisors are on as much as £128,000 and outside government the levels can be much higher, and generally higher than journalists. Despite the monetary rewards though, this is a difficult profession to enter (in 2006 there were only 84 special advisors⁵, fewer heads of press office and only a handful of party communication chiefs) and their shelf life can be relatively short. Political PRs also appear to be more highly educated than journalists with an analysis of the educational background of government special advisors (in 2002) indicating that 55% have an MSc or PhD, 55% went to Oxbridge and almost all attended 'red brick' Universities.⁶

Numerous skills are required to be a political PR. Personal skills involve self-confidence, approachability and foresight with nothing being "more important each day than figuring out what the news was going to be" (Fallows, 1996: 187). Other skills involve speech writing, research, media planning and an ability to understand and predict how reporters might think and react in any given set of circumstances. Jones also considers two other invaluable skills. Knowing your enemy by understanding that journalists are always looking for fresh material and a fresh angle for every major bulletin and political comprehension, such as an ability to give advice on the likely implication of votes and decisions (Jones, 1999: 123-7). The biggest skill for political PRs though

² In particular see Miller and Dinan (2000).

³ See also Kavanagh (1995) and Franklin (1997).

⁴ Hansard 25 July 2006

⁵ Hansard 25 July 2006

⁶ Analysis conducted from special advisor biographies on Dods database – November 2002.

is to understand how the news media works. All of those interviewed agreed that the most valuable tactic a political PR can use is to be knowledgeable about the ways that journalists work. The more knowledgeable, the easier it is for them to second guess the interest in a story and any likely reactions to it. "The more the source comes to understand the needs of the reporter the greater the source's ability to ensure that what becomes news is close to the original information released" (Ericson et al, 1989: 14). Being able to understand and predict how reporters might think and react in any given set of circumstances means they are able to calculate the worst-case scenario should the news media decide to put forward the least favourable interpretation on what has happened (Jones, 1995: 123). The importance of the PR understanding how the news media works is not a new thing though. 50 years ago Brebner was advising that "to understand the press is more than a matter of understanding its requirements. It is necessary also to have a deep and intimate understanding of its people" (Brebner, 1949: 21). Interviewees from all groups agreed wholeheartedly that this still applies today:

It was not a coincidence that Alistair Campbell had so much power for he was a former journalist. He knew the mind set and ways of the media and can think how they will do it and found ways to satisfy their insatiable hunger. (J4)

The best way to work with political journalists is to get to know people in the press gallery really well. (PC5)

Many political PRs began their professional careers in the television and media industries (Bartle & Griffiths, 2001: 111) and often become known as 'poachers turned gatekeepers.' Over half of former Prime Ministers' press secretaries were previously journalists⁷ and Golding talks of a circular industry where journalists have gone into political PR. Political PRs are "increasingly aware of the mechanics of broadcasting and are therefore in a much improved position to manipulate it" (Golding et al, 1986: 105). This was backed up by a special advisor:

Most spin doctors come from media backgrounds, so understand how the media works. Most politicians do not. Politicians want to go on Today – they do not understand that they would get to more voters if they went onto Radio 2 or the independent stations. (PC3)

This understanding and focus on the way the news media works is reflected in the structures within press offices and communications teams. To know the news media; to follow the news organisations' structures, to understand the way journalists work, and to know the basic facts

⁷ Prime Ministers Press Secretaries: William Clark (Sir Anthony Eden) former journalist / Sir Harold Evans (Macmillan) civil servant / Joe Haines (Sir Harold Wilson) former journalist / Sir Donald Maitland (Edward Heath) civil servant / Bernard Ingham (Margaret Thatcher) former journalist / Sir Christopher Meyer (Margaret Thatcher) civil servant / Alistair Campbell (Tony Blair) former journalist / David Hill (Tony Blair) political PR.

about deadlines, locations and the news values to which the organisation adheres, can make or break a political PR. Their skill in predicting how and when their information will become a news story is their power within their department or party and without this they are purely an information officer, rather than a political PR.

6.3.1 Departmental press officers

Every government department has a press office which will liaise with the media on the work of the department. Since 1809 (as chapter three shows) there has been a massive expansion in the importance of the news media to government departments and an equal growth in the expansion of the press office staff numbers to match this.⁸ Davis has looked at the numbers of information officers employed in government departments from the years 1979 to 1999. The only departments where numbers have gone down are the Ministry of Defence and Department of Environment and all other departmental numbers have risen by an average of 132% (Davis, 2002: 21). In 2000 it was estimated that the Government Information and Communications Service employed around 1200 Information Offices plus support staff and has a budget into the hundreds of millions of pounds (Miller and Dinan, 2000: 11). In 2006 this had increased to 1,815 press officers and public relations staff in the main departments across Whitehall and a further 1,444 working for the 200 quangos and agencies funded by taxpayers.⁹ A former advisor to Margaret Thatcher said that whilst he fought for two years to get an extra press officer, when Labour came into power in 1997 this happened immediately.

Labour doubled the amount of press officers in one night and they had much more say in what happened in central government.” (PO2)

A press officer told me that in his department:

In 1998 there were six press officers here and now there are 18 to 20. (PO3)

This increase in numbers has been matched by a huge increase in the number of press releases from Whitehall. Between 1995 and 1998 the number rose from 5,712 a year to 10,303 (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 121). This, it was suggested, was due to the rise in 24 hour news. (PO3)

With the increase in numbers of press officers and press releases it follows that there is also a significant growth in costs. The communications budget in Whitehall rose from £575,000 in 1997

⁸ The IPO directory of July 2004, listing the information and press officers in government departments and public corporations is 180 pages long and lists the press officers for 180 public bodies. Some departments have huge press teams (in this edition the FCO was shown to have 38, The Cabinet Office 45) others only three or four (Arts Council England has three, the Information Commissioners Office has four).

⁹ The IPO directory of July 2006.

to £2.4 million in 2003 (Hansard, 2004). Looking at just one department, The Prime Minister's Office, costs doubled between the Conservatives in 1996 and Labour in 2003.¹⁰ This increase is reflected by one of Thatcher's former press officers who worked in the Number 10 Press Office at the end of the 1980s and in the early nineties. He said when he worked there:

The whole of Number 10 was only about 70 people and that included the cleaners... At Number 10 there were eight in the press office, four party political people, then there was the policy unit with six people and then six or seven people in a think tank (coming out with the back to basics ideas). Then there were the secretaries, cleaners and detectives. (PO2)

The numbers may have risen dramatically but they have risen to match the requirements of journalists working in a competitive, technologically driven, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week news media environment.

The growth of the media has led to more people being needed to deal with the media. The old civil service did not have the numbers or the ability and could never have coped with today's media. And now with a more specialised media you need a specialised army of people to communicate with. (P5)

The First Division Association (FDA),¹¹ in giving evidence to the Phillis Review in 2003, said that although there is now a much greater 24 hour element to the work of the communications departments, the level of political and departmental sensitivity to the media is no greater than it was 25 years ago. What has changed, they say, "is the centralisation of communications in the Prime Ministers office...and its demand for a more proactive engagement with the media" (FDA 2003: 1).

The code of conduct for departmental press officers says that they are required to be neutral, to provide information to journalists but not to hold a party political stance on it. From the evidence gathered during my interviews this appears to be the case.

A civil servant should be an individual who would be equally acceptable to any political party...In a democracy the communications team in each department should give equal access to all parties and they should not be so partisan. (P6)

It is harder when there are more political issues or shameless campaigning. But we then must work closely with the people in our minister's parliamentary office. (PO3)

¹⁰ From just under £600,000 in 1996 to just under £1.4 million in 2002.

¹¹ The union for the senior managers in the civil service.

Press officers still need to be able to understand how a journalist thinks and what information they will need. The FDA evidence to the Phillis review said that “most civil servants...need to have an awareness of how the media operates and an understanding of the broader issues of presentation and perception” (FDA, 2003: 5). A new development and one which follows a recommendation of the Phillis review (see chapter three) is for professional training to be introduced which will be overseen by the permanent secretary. Despite this, during my research, I was told by civil service press officers that they were already making efforts to understand journalists and work more proactively with them. One press officer (PO3) talked about how he had made an effort to get to know the journalists specialising in his department (not the political ones) and specifically targeted a list of key journalists. The press officer took them out to get to know them better and gave them personal briefings as and when their favourite issues arose. He also learnt what their main issues were so he could draft press releases in a way that would be guaranteed to get coverage. This is not the activity of someone simply acting as an information conduit for a government department. Instead it has been called the politicisation of press officers.

6.3.2 Special advisors

Special advisors work within individual government departments to provide specialist advice to ministers which they would not be able to get from civil servants. Cabinet Ministers may appoint up to two special advisers to his or her departmental staff. They are classified as temporary civil servants and employed for the duration of an administration to provide a political dimension to the non-partisan work of the general civil service. They are appointed to undertake tasks that would be inappropriate for career civil servants and to operate where government policy and party politics overlap. Their salaries are paid by the Crown but they are allowed to work from a party political stance and provide a bridge between civil servants and ministers, often filtering out information and acting as a gatekeeper to the minister. Although not traditionally the case, they now conduct media relations on behalf of ministers.¹²

In 2006 there were 84 government / departmental special advisors, many of whom worked on media relations. The number of special advisors has gone up significantly in the years to 2006.¹³ A special advisor who worked in the 1970s told me that the 1974 government had 20 or 30 special advisors (SA4). Another former advisor says it has changed beyond all recognition and that until 1997 there would be only one special advisor in each government department (SA3). In the year 1995-6 there were 38 special advisors at a cost of £1.5 million. By 1998 this had increased to 74 (costing £3.5 million) and by 2001 it had risen to 81 at a cost of £5.1 million. In 2006 there were

¹² For more to the rules surrounding special advisors see Street (2001: 145-150).

¹³ Source: House of Commons Hansard, 31 January 2003, Doug Alexander.

84 special advisers, each with an average salary of £69,000 costing a total of £5.8 million¹⁴. Now each department is officially allowed two and, if they can justify why, they can lobby for more. The tipping point appears to be when the Labour Party was elected in 1997.

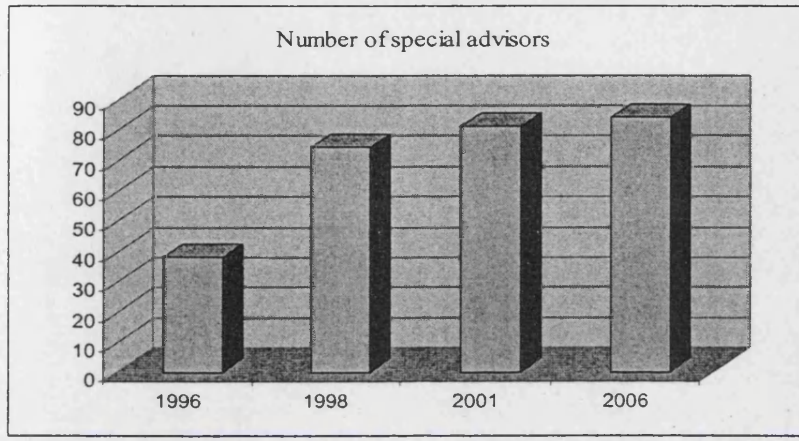


Chart 6c: Growth of special advisers

As well as the growth in the number of special advisers it has also been said that “there has been a sharp expansion in the role of special advisers. They used to engage largely, but not entirely, in policy work, and now many of them are engaged in spin” (Tyrie, 2004). The official role of a special advisor is to review policy papers prepared by departmental staff, as well as to prepare their own policy documents and plan future strategies. They may also liaise with the party machine and brief MPs on departmental policies and add political content to speeches and other documents drafted by impartial civil servants. They “operate at the borders of two distinct societal systems between the political and media systems” (Esser et al, 2000: 216).

The role of a special advisor is debated continuously in the news media, the halls of the Commons, the pubs of Westminster and Whitehall and in academic circles. Are they simply in place to neutrally filter out the important messages in the mass of information sent to a minister and restrict news media attention or are they entirely political in nature? They inhabit an ill-defined overlap between party politics and the administration of the affairs of state. Jones describes them as a “hybrid, bound by civil service rules but still able to put a political gloss on a minister’s work, so they have exactly the right credentials to undertake the deft and discreet task of supplying tip-offs and giving exclusive one-to-one briefings to picked journalists” (Jones, 1999: 73). This viewpoint supports, whether rightly or wrongly, many of the other myths and conspiracy theories surrounding special advisers. They are seen (and often depicted in the news media) as backroom boys, manipulating the media, overriding civil servants and bullying journalists. Some have a strong dislike of special advisers, claiming:

¹⁴ Source: House of Commons Hansard. 25 July 2006, Tony Blair.

Most are shadowy anonymous people. They flit in the background. Never want to be the story but they are happy to put in the knife into anyone else. This is why they are poisonous...They are like the women at the guillotine in France, sitting at the side knitting whilst the royals were executed. They do their job well but they are not honourable...They are a cancer of the government. (P3)

The negative views however have been widely disputed from three angles. Initially they can be defended by the fact that actually many special advisors do not get involved with media relations work. Often their role is simply to provide specialist advice to a minister in an area of expertise. A former special advisor told a Select Committee that only "a very small minority of special advisors specialise in press management – something that has already greatly diminished and will continue after Alastair Campbell's departure" (Clark, 2001). Many interviewees however said that, before the 1990s, special advisors were all specialists in their department's issues and that since 1997 "a far higher proportion than ever before were engaged, not only in policy issues, but on media relations work" (Jones, 1999: 67). A former special advisor said that in 1974:

When I was a special advisor we spent 20% of our time dealing with media issues. Now I imagine it is up to 80%. In our time there was no such person who only did media work. (SA4)

Other, current, special advisors dispute this however saying:

There have always been generalist special advisors. And we do have specialists. Out of 81 special advisors there are only 11 who deal with media but it is hard to separate them out. (SA5)

The second defence is that they fulfil a basic, necessary and legitimate function to act as bridge between media and government (Ingham, 1991: 164). They claim they are "not the horrible, Machiavellian people as portrayed. They say their role is simply to disseminate the huge range of information that we have to get out in a co-ordinated way" (Campbell, 2000a: 6-15). Special advisors simply "ensure that the government's communications orchestra is seen and heard to be playing from one score in tune and in time" (Ingham, 1991: 45). This is backed up by the FDA who maintain that "the most effective special advisors are those who have a good grasp of the structure and functions of the Civil Service and Government and are also able to liaise effectively with the media (FDA, 1998).

A final defence is that the special advisor acts as gatekeeper between ministers and all others (including civil servants and journalists) to protect their political masters from "unwelcome intrusions" (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 116). One particular unwelcome intrusion is that of the

media, “special advisors who can deal professionally and responsibly with the media remove pressure from civil servants in general and the GIS in particular” (FDA, 1998).

Our role is as a fire wall. We have one warm side to keep the rest of the civil service politically clear and I think we do a pretty good job. Without us there would be no separation of what was political or not...You can introduce party political content more than civil servants. First person in a crisis is the special advisor. If a special advisor did not exist you would have to invent them. (SA5)

All special advisors, and those journalists they work with, stated that their relationship with their boss was vital and that it is essential that special advisors are trusted by journalists as being close to the person they represent and clearly talking on their behalf. They will be assessed by journalists for their authority and credibility (Golding et al, 1986: 68) and “convincing journalists that one knows the mind of the key decision-makers...and can speak with ‘authority’ is a huge advantage” (Manning, 2001: 152).

Political journalists trust me as someone close to [the minister]. A lot of it is down to proximity. It is important for political journalists that they are speaking to someone who is close to their minister. (SA6)

A good spin doctor must be speaking on behalf of, and be perceived by the media to be speaking on behalf of. (PC5)

A further requirement, long term, is for a special advisor to be honest. A special advisor who is not honest and straight will, to begin with, be able to get away with a lot simply because that their information is necessary to fill 24 news schedules and match the required amounts of information for the vast number of news dissemination channels. Once political journalists realise the information they are being fed is unreliable though, they will never be trusted again and their tenure as a special advisor will be perilously short.

6.3.3 Party communicators

The 1980s witnessed a dramatic expansion in the communication efforts of the political parties. This was reflected in an expansion of staff numbers in their communication teams (Franklin, 1997: 3). Now the three main parties all have larger teams and utilise all the opportunities for public relations that new technology provides. They also try to mirror the structures inside the departments using many of the same information dissemination and database techniques.

The main difference though seems to be the importance to party communication officers of their contacts and relationships with journalists. There is no automatic public interest in a political party as there is with a government department so they need to 'earn' their place at the media table rather than just 'receive' it as special advisors and departmental press officers do. The predominant way they seem to manage this is for the party communicator to learn how the lobby works and who works within it. This is not a quick task and a party communicator needs longevity in the job to be successful.

It takes two years to get to know the scene and to be accepted by the lobby correspondents. (PC1)

It takes two years to get to know the press gallery as a whole and if the party media teams keep changing they don't build as close a relationship as longer term teams do. Lobby correspondents need to know and to trust you...Validity is based on how often you walk round and talk to the journalists. (PC5)

Alongside this it is essential that party communicators build up personal relationships.

Our relationship tends to be very personality based rather than institutionally based. People within the company have their own journalistic relationships... My own relationship with journalists is not based on who I work for despite the fact the company is very well known. It is based on their views of our stance on politics and our personal relationships. (PR1)

The fact their relationships are so personality based is important. Special advisors and departmental press officers have an implied right to speak to the news media because of their closeness to those in power. Political party press officers (especially those in the minority parties) have to make much more of an effort to see their views published. The personal relationships they build are critical to their success as a political PR.

6.3.4 Relationship between the groups

As in any area, relationships between groups can have a significant effect on how a business or organisation is run. In the political public relations industry this is multiplied many times over for the personnel are rivals, not only for news media space but for political power and influence and a huge amount of tension can arise. A particular area of contention is between special advisors and civil service press officers.

Special advisors are political appointees and have a separate appointment process and pay structure from the civil service. Press officers are regular members of the civil service. There have been some contentions about the role and relationship between the two groups in recent years. These issues have arisen since 1997 mainly as a result of three elements. Firstly, there was a massive increase in special advisers (chart 6c) when Labour got elected. Secondly, two Number 10 special advisors were given civil servant status, something that had never been done before. Finally, many new appointments were made to the head of news role in government departments. These appointments often brought in outsiders who were career media or PR professionals rather than career civil servants.¹⁵

The rules state that a press officer should be apolitical and equally able to work for whichever political party is in power. The FDA have supported this saying that: "there exists within the civil service generally, and the GIS in particular, a strong cultural ethos of political impartiality and most civil servants feel little hesitation in raising their concerns when they felt this to be challenged" (FDA, 1998). Politicians agree as demonstrated by this interviewee:

I have never known a press officer rubbish a rival minister of another department except on one occasion. A spin doctor will do this. A lot of the Brown/Blair bitchiness has come about this way and the information on this in the papers comes from their spin doctors.
(J6)

This split of political impartiality between special advisors and press officers worked well in the past as a special advisor from the 1970s told me:

We worked extremely closely together. I was good at putting the party political points of view forward. And we had a division of labour. We had a close day-to-day relationship and were useful to each other. (SA4)

We have a very good relationship. They do muscle in and they can make suggestions but do not tell us what to do. Most of it is informal...It takes a lot of the heat off the Sir Humphrey system as ministers have good sources of advice. (PO3)

This positive relationship was not universal however and the FDA has asked for special advisors to be defined as a category of government servants distinct from the civil service (FDA, 2003: 18). This defined separation is backed up by other researchers who say there is rivalry between promotional professionals and administrative civil servants (Miller, 1993). A view reflected by a special advisor:

¹⁵ There have been numerous debates about the validity and desirability of these changes, and many of the issues were brought up within my interviewees however they are not up for discussion here. Of interest is Hencke (2004a & 2004b).

Special advisors relationships with civil servants are strained. (SA3)

When the relationship does become strained it can be due to special advisors sidestepping press officers. A former press officer at Number 10 said that when Labour came in they did not trust the civil service.

It has only been in recent years that he has had to rely more on civil servants and he has realised they can do the job well and can be non-partisan. They must now rely more on civil servants for day to day work. They tried to side step the civil service and realised they could not. (PO2)

A second rift in the relationship comes from the styles that are used by each group. Special advisors know they have a limited term in power, a civil servant has a lifetime career in government.

Spin doctors come in for a presidency. Civil servants and politicians are there long term. If a politician does something wrong they will be remembered about on a long term basis. A spin doctor can be much more ruthless. (P6)

This idea of 'life time' versus 'presidency' means that the levels of risks taken and the attitude portrayed can be very different, and often conflicting. Despite these conflicts however, both groups work with the media, often on behalf of the same department or minister, and thus there needs to be an understanding of the split of work between the two groups. There seem to be four main ways that public relations work can be split between special advisors and civil servants: (1) political versus departmental, (2) information provision versus political thinking, (3) ways of dealing with journalists versus editor relationship building and (4) the split of putting out information versus trying to contain the release of information.

The first split involves separating out party political from departmental work especially as one prescribed role of special advisors is to take the political issues out of the hands of civil servants. Civil service press officers will talk to the specialist journalists – giving them information on their speciality subjects – on the subject of their department. Special advisers will talk to political journalists, giving them the political stance and background on what the department is doing or the minister is saying.

The role of the special advisor was to act as a dumping ground for civil servants when it was getting too political. If something was obvious PR for the minister themselves, or a speech or was political and party liaison and was not the domain of the civil servants and

they loved being able to pass things on! It was a symbiotic relationship. Special Advisors were a buffer between Whitehall and Parliament. (SA3)

This 'buffer' situation is not new. "Special advisors have always had a political role. That is why they were invented; to prevent the rest of the government machine from being contaminated by having to handle work of a partisan political character" (Clark, 2001). Sir Richard Wilson, the former cabinet secretary, backed this up informing press officers that special advisors should not ask civil servants to do anything "immoral or illegal nor do anything to undermine the political impartiality of civil servants to give their own best advice to ministers" (Wilson, 2004: 294).

A second role, as elucidated by the Phillis committee, when it gave its interim report in 2003, said that special advisors and civil servants both have important, but different, roles to play. They reported that there can be a split between information provision and political thinking saying that "civil servants can and should do more than issue press releases...however when playing an advocacy role, a civil servant may find that the media want to press on the Minister's underlying political thinking" (Phillis, 2003). This underlying political thinking should be put forward by the special advisor. A former special advisor put this view bluntly stating:

They [press officers] did the shit stuff and I [special advisor] did the glamour job. I never wrote a press release when I was there. (SA2)

I get involved when something needs more weight and credibility. We both have the job of protecting and promoting [minister]. I also do the longer term thinking, give the media the bigger picture and also give [minister] some policy advice. (SA6)

The difference between the two roles can sometimes become confused but, as these comments show, there is an official view on how the roles should be split.

One impression given by the interviewees was that there was more to the split of work between special advisors and press officers than the political status of it – that it is also based on the types of journalists with whom they dealt. An interviewee discussed this and said the split was not about the type of stories being used, or perhaps about the tactics, but more along the lines of with whom each group dealt.

Special advisers dealt with the editors and the Government Information Service dealt with the journalists. (PC6)

The idea that civil service press officers deal with the journalists and special advisors deal with the political editors and editors indicates that weighting is given to the special advisors input and that

the fact that they speak with the consent of the minister rather than just the department gives their voice more gravitas. This also ties in with earlier view given that there is a split between information provision and political thinking.

Finally, looking back to 1949, we can read that: “a press service is a means of communicating information, not a means of withholding it. It is also a means of keeping the press in contact with the policy makers” (Brebner, 1949: 19). It is obvious from even a most cursory glance that this is no longer the case and that today, political public relations are balanced upon two types of activities. One involves reacting to, defending and re-butting negative stories and another involves pushing information which shows the government, department or party in a positive light. These two activities form the basis for a political PR’s activities and many interviewed by Davis said that they spent the majority of their time “blocking and reacting to negative coverage rather than promoting policy and debate” and that they spent 70-75% of their time trying to keep stories out of the papers (Davis, 2003: 678).

Most of the time you do not want to get a political story in the press – you are more likely to try and stop them. (PC6)

The view is often that civil servants put out information doing the positive work – disseminating stories to the media in a simple way (through press releases, press conferences etc) and special advisors work more strategically with the media to stop stories going in or to push them towards other areas of their department or party. A press officer however complained that this split diminished their ability to work successfully with political journalists.

A lot of them take the view that anything we want to get out is not news to journalists. (PO3)

This split in work can make the job of a press officer more difficult because most journalistic news values favour stories which show the government in a negative light. These splits can also be classed as above and below the line and this will be explored in 6.4.2.

Overall then, the special advisor is deemed to deal with the political stories, which require a viewpoint from the minister, which may well include longer term political thinking and often they give this information directly to the publication’s editor. They may also try to prevent information being released and try to contain any stories which have been published about those for whom they work. A party communicator will also follow these lines. Departmental press officers however are in place to provide neutral, non-political information to those of the same hierarchical level as themselves, the political beat journalists. These splits in role are usually implicit rather than explicit and the boundaries can blur from job to job, department to department however, in

theory, it should be the press officer taking a neutral, informational role, the special advisor and party communicator giving a more value-laden politically-focused opinion.

6.4 Numerous and focused information control tactics

The day to day work of political PRs (of all three types) has become more and more complex as the news media has grown in size, competitiveness and moved towards tabloidisation. There is a more intense atmosphere for those handling the media on behalf of parties or the government. There is an increased sense of importance over cuttings, a greater flow of stories, briefings & calls, more sensitivity as to how their bosses are perceived and a greater emphasis on the monitoring of the news media's output. A political PR, as described in Martin Sixsmith's novel *Spin*, must now be an expert in "how carrots, sticks, black eyes, blackmail, saccharine and smears, seduction and schmooze can be deployed to keep the government at the top of the news agendas; how the media could be flattered and cowed into submission; how difficult journalists could be neutralised; and how inconvenient stories can be killed by kindness, by cunning or by cutting some bastard's balls off" (Mount, 2004). The day-to-day life of the political PR will cover this multitude of roles. However they do have an arsenal of (1) procedures, (2) tactical activities and (3) technological devices to hand in order to attempt to control their information. Many of the tactical activities will use the technological devices and follow the new procedures but they will be separated here in order for ease of comprehension and to highlight the mix of skills and opportunities available for political PRs to influence and control political journalists.

6.4.1 Political PR procedures

The changes in the news media have meant that each political PR department has had to develop a set of methods and facilities with which to approach their job in order to monitor and negotiate the activities and questioning of political journalists. Political PRs have to counter the changes in the news media with specific activities which have changed the entire face of political public relations. The main procedures used include (1) daily briefing sessions, (2) strategic grids of all activities, (3) meticulous media monitoring, (4) automatic rapid rebuttal and (5) the implementation of a key themes unit.

For political PRs in government (but also increasingly in the parties and trade associations, agencies and corporate companies) daily briefing sessions take place first thing where the heads of press meet to discuss the day's news stories and those which will need reaction. One political PR gave an example of this, discussing a time when the Conservative Party was in power with a tiny majority and the Lib Dems realised they had power over the vote on Maastricht:

There were huge discussions within the Lib Dem media team on how this story was to be given to the press. During this time we had a daily morning media meeting to discuss the tactics to be used and they were considered to be very important. (PC5)

These meetings focus everyone on the 'stories of the day' to allow them to make the most of the news space available. These stories of the day are placed upon a 'grid' which contains information on all communications activity across the departments.¹⁶ This method started when Labour were in opposition as a way of determining how they would attempt to set the news agenda during election campaigns. It was brought into government in 1997 and is still used daily in the 9am 10 Downing Street press briefing which the head of press for each department attends. The grid allows departments to co-ordinate responses and work together effectively.

In order to get the message across and to show they are 'singing from the same hymn sheet' they must learn to say the official lines given to them. If they did not do this a journalist would spot the differences and turn it into a 'Government split over...' story. The whole system conspires towards uniformity. (J6)

The grid, whilst conspiring towards uniformity, has been defended by Bob Phillis (2004) who said it simply helps organisations co-ordinate to prevent unnecessary clashes and to give prominence to things which appear to be important.

A further procedure followed rigorously now by political PRs is media monitoring, something for which the Labour government is famous. Politicians and their PRs are provided with an overnight summary each morning, listing the contents of the newspapers and breakfast programmes, and this is updated throughout the day. Two of Thatcher's former press officers said this was very different from their day with one saying:

Thatcher never read her cuttings she just read a summarised version. She trusted what we told her about how she was being perceived in the media. (PO2)

Others hailed back to a time where Clement Attlee was so disengaged with the news media that the only way his press secretary could persuade him to install a ticker tape machine in Downing Street was to tell him that it would provide the cricket scores (Rawnsley, 2003b: 27). This is very different to today where cuttings are scrutinised and reacted to with extreme speed and efficiently. Before Labour came into power they set up a unit for monitoring the media and they brought this into government once they won the election. They now have a strategic monitoring unit within central government which works 24 hours a day, seven days a week to ensure that no news story is missed.

¹⁶ See Routledge (1999: 90) and Gould (1998: 335-337).

Any stories which are identified through monitoring and which purvey the government, department or party in a negative light will be attacked by rapid rebuttal. This occurs in a variety of ways. The 'pager' is famous within New Labour for 'keeping MPs on message' and reminding them about party policy and when to vote. A computer system, called Excalibur, was created for the 1997 election to compile and catalogue all news stories so that those using it were able to rebut stories from the opposition parties instantly. They could find out any inaccuracies in opposition policy statements instantly and either rebut them on the floor of the Commons or call journalists in seconds to point out these errors. These systems are now used by civil servants and special advisors as well as party staff. All political PRs will use technology to make rapid rebuttal work. In one departmental press office, on-duty press officers carry two mobile phones (one for journalists and one for the minister to call on) and a laptop on their person at all times so they can get the most up to date 'lines' on any story at any time. Similar systems have been set up in many other departments and other political party offices since to ensure all those who were speaking to the media are giving out the correct information

Finally, in order to maximise the amount and position of on-message information being dispersed by government, when New Labour were elected in 1997 they established a key themes unit titled the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU).¹⁷ It was based in Number 10 and was tasked with ensuring the government's essential messages and key themes were sustained and not lost in the gaps between events. Blair said the idea was to improve strategic planning and would ensure announcements, launches of white papers and other initiatives were consistent with the overall thrust of government policy (Jones, 1999: 131). It was staffed with former journalists whose task was to write newspaper columns on behalf of Blair and to pull "together and share with departments the government's key policy themes and messages" (Select Committee on Public Administration, 1998: xiii). It has been said in light of this that "Blair is more likely now to be read in the Sun than heard in the Commons" (Scammell, 2000: 182).

6.4.2 Control tactics available to political PRs

Numerous tactics have been identified as being available to political PRs in order to get views and information into the news media in a positive light. "The techniques refined by New Labour – the rapid rebuttal, the selective leak, the hyping of modest achievements into fantastic achievements... up to and including the torture of the truth until it screamed for mercy" (Rawnsley, 2003a: 27). Whilst not everyone feels as strongly as Rawnsley does about the tactics used to gain coverage, they have created a lot of interest amongst researchers.¹⁸ There is no handy published guide

¹⁷ For more see Scammell (2003: 524-5), Jones (1999: 131) or Riddell (2000: 163).

¹⁸ Sigal (1973), Tiffin (1989), Eldridge (1993), Franklin (1994), Negrine (1996), Alger (1996), McNair (1999) and Gaber (2003) have all looked at the tactics used by general PRs and other observers have begun to document more politically focused tactics

detailing these tactics yet many were discussed by the interviewees, either as someone who used them or someone who has had them used on them. They are not just confined to political PRs. Politicians I interviewed, also discussed times when they left information in a photocopier or slid into press conferences and suggested a few questions to a journalist (P4) in order to sway news media coverage.

There are various ways of considering the types of tactics used and of assessing if there is any difference in the tactics used by special advisors and those used by press officers. Barnett and Gaber (2001: 102) split tactics into those which can be seen as above and below the line activities. They say that above the line activities (listed in Gaber, 2003: 4-9) are those overt initiatives taken by media managers which are similar to activities undertaken by press officers. These include press releases, press conferences and giving speeches and interviews. Below the line activities are more covert and as “much about strategy and tactics as imparting information” (Barnett and Gaber, 2001: 102) and are seen as more of a “process than as an event” (Barnett and Gaber, 2001: 106).

It is the below the line activities in which I am interested as they characterise the more reactive but less well known and more discrete aspects of the relationship between political PRs and journalists. It also seems to be the below the line activities which are conducted by special advisors and the party communicators rather than traditional departmental press officers.

The below the line tactics are not simply to give out basic information but to help political PRs override the gatekeeping powers of the journalists in order to “ensure that nothing is allowed to get in the way of the story the government wants to get over” (Ingham, 1991: 188). They are part of what characterises today’s political PR industry. Many journalists¹⁹ and former party and political PRs²⁰ have written about these below the line tactics and it seems they fit into two categories. The first category looks at the specific manner that information is expressed by political PRs, with the attitudes they convey and their ways of communicating with the journalist. The second considers specific methods of communication and dissemination of the information, the actual physical movement of the information.

used by political PRs (Golding et al 1986, Nelson 1989, Tiffin 1989, Rosenbaum 1997 and Jones 1999) and there now there are even handbooks for ‘how to do political PR’ (such as Richards 1998).

¹⁹ Including John Sergeant from ITN (2001) and Nick Jones (1995, 1999 & 2003a) and Michael Cockerell (1984 & 2000) from the BBC.

²⁰ Such as Phillip Gould (1998) who worked for Blair and Ingham (1991 & 2003) who worked for Thatcher.

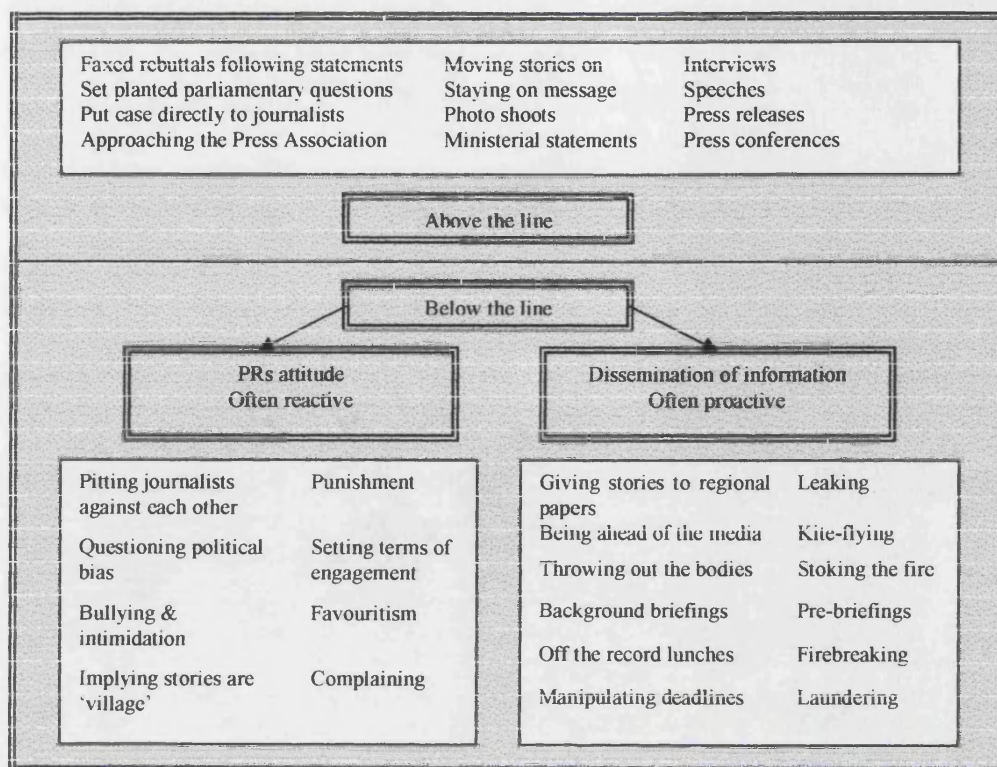


Chart 6b: Separation of above and below the line & attitude and dissemination tactics, J Perry

These separations provide an interesting way to analyse the tactics that are used and the ways in which they are used.

6.4.2.1 *Political PR attitude*

The tactics, concerning the attitude, tone and manner of persuasion used when communicating information with journalists, are mainly reactive methods, usually used to respond to the actions of journalists, either when they have published stories which are unhelpful to the political PR or when they are being pestered by the journalist for information they do not want to give. All the following methods were raised during the interviews and whilst they are not listed here in order of regularity of use, the tactics of (1) bullying and intimidation, (2) complaining, (3) punishment, and (4) favouritism came up most often. Other tactics mentioned were (5) implying to journalists that their stories are not worth covering, (6) questioning their political bias and impartiality, (7) pitting journalists against each other and (8) setting the terms of engagement.

The tactic of bullying and intimidation was not only the most commonly quoted one but also the one journalists, quite understandably, felt strongest about. A letter written by Greg Dyke to Tony Blair in March 2003 accused the government of "systematic bullying and intimidation of the BBC over its coverage of the Iraq war" (Dyke, 2004). This high level of bullying was reflected in the

interviews and sometimes they described very blatant abuse they had received from special advisors. One journalist spoke of his abuse at the hands of Alistair Campbell.

I have received a 'Fuck Off' from Alistair Campbell after writing a negative piece about him. (J2)

This bullying can be developed into a propensity to intimidate by making the journalist realise how much the political PR knows about them, their role and their timetable.

When I was first appointed to Chief Political Correspondent, [Political PR] was on the phone within minutes checking he had the right numbers for me and asking if he had my rota correct. It was a subtle way of letting me know he was in control. (J2)

The bullying described does not always seem to be overt and can sometimes be carried out more secretly with political PRs showing a "willingness to isolate and smear journalists who write 'unhelpful' stories" (Osborne, 2002: 32-40). This is often conducted by encouraging an in-group (who are fed stories but can be trusted to portray them positively) against an out-group who can "find themselves not just excluded from information from sources of information but also openly bullied" (Barnett & Gaber: 2001: 113).²¹ Political PRs have been accused of belittling journalists to their superiors and one mentioned that he knew of two attempts by Tony Blair to persuade his editor to get rid of him (J5). Others discussed how:

Methods by Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell were to reward and rubbish journalists to their editors and to conduct a reign of terror. (PO1)

This intimidation tactic is often carried out by complaining about journalists either to the journalist concerned or to their editors. All journalists spoken to said they had experienced problems like this and seem to accept it as part of the job. One journalist talked about one particular special advisor.

He has called me straight after interviews before to set me straight. (J7)

This intimidation has been said to have got worse since 1997. Osborne and Walters stated that "numerous reporters have had the experience of being run down behind their backs to their editors or proprietors by New Labour spin-doctors. This weapon could be used even against close allies who strayed from the party or government line" (Osborne & Walters, 2004: 201). Whilst bullying

²¹ Further examples of this bullying are discussed in Bartle and Griffiths (2001: 10), Osborne & Walters (2004: 125), Jones (1999: 23-237), Gaber (1998: 17), Davis (2002: 30), Rosenbaum (1997) and Barnett & Gaber (2001: 113).

is often done face-to-face, intimidation and complaining can happen more secretly, behind closed doors and this causes professional instability, making it a particularly unpleasant tactic.

In defence, political PRs say that they are “entitled to have a view and if they get stories we think are wrong or unfair, I’m entitled to say so” (Campbell, 2000b: 7-20). It is also seen as an automatic part of a political PRs job “to be on the phone for much of the day complaining – about perceived bias, lack of time given to an item, too much time given to an opponent, lack of prominence given to a story, an interview being dropped, or incorrectly slanted facts” (Richards, 1998: 120).

A further tactic involves punishment for those journalists who do not toe the line given by the political PR. Punishments can involve blackballing (withholding stories), not returning calls on future stories or giving private briefings or exclusives to the journalist’s rival publication. Journalists signing up for the ‘awkward squad’ would have interview bids rejected, exclusives stopped and it would all be done with an “unprecedented degree of bitterness and brutality” (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 113). Patience Wheatcroft of *The Times* has said that when Charlie Wheelan was upset at a story by their financial editor he punished them for a year; shutting them out, making them persona non grata and refusing to give them stories (Wheatcroft, 2003). The tactic is frowned upon by many involved however and no interviewees, not even political PRs, said they saw it as a positive thing.

We certainly should not have journalists being blackballed. It is a Stalinist approach and entirely improper. (P6)

Political PRs did admit that occasionally punishments do get carried out and that although the department will speak to journalists who have upset the special advisor, it will be the press office who makes contact or takes the calls ensuring that the journalist can get regular stories but no exclusives or background information. (SA5) One former special advisor admitted he did occasionally refuse to speak to journalists but acknowledged:

It is not a good idea because if not speaking you are not communicating. (SA2)

The tactic does seem to be a successful one though as one journalist said that their job is hard enough already and that:

If one is blacklisted then you can be in trouble. (J5)

A further well used tactic is favouritism. This simply involves favouring certain journalists, giving them exclusives and stories and ease of access to information in order to ensure a friendly hearing, a positive story or a favour when they need one.

You have to find out who is most likely to be onside ...giving something to a friendly journalist. (PC3)

With the massive growth in competition within the news media there is now much more pressure for journalists to get stories quickly and cheaply. Replicating this, there is pressure, even within the civil service, for political PRs to get stories published so it makes economic sense (though maybe not good ethical judgement) for all in the political news industry for favourites to exist.

Now press offices are under pressure to get stories in papers so have favourites even to the point of discriminating. (PO1)

A special advisor describes exactly how he goes about this process, stating that it is not favouritism but good media relations in ensuring the right journalists cover the story. He starts by considering how far up they would place the story in the paper, then how favourably they will write the story, what the journalist's agenda is (pro business, pro unions, personality splits) and finally what the paper's take would be. These change for each issue. He works from a list of journalists which contain the "usual suspects," but he also has his own list with those he "feels he can trust" (SA6). This favouritism may not be entirely ethical but it is the natural result of the relationships which build up in the political news industry.

A further favoured tactic used by political PRs is implying to journalists that their stories are not worth covering. This takes place in two ways. Firstly they imply that stories are 'village,' that they would only concern those who work in the 'Westminster Village' and that people outside Westminster (i.e. their audience or readers) would not be interested nor find it important.

Being told by a politician that a story is 'only a village thing' and people outside Westminster would not understand or care about it. Or saying that they cannot believe you are boring the nation with this story. Or calling it irrelevant. (J2)

The tactic also includes insinuating that a story is old and not worthy of coverage.

There is a battle which takes place all the time for news agenda and always a sense in mind of journalists and spin doctors that nothing is as dead as yesterday's story or news. If you can convince them they've already seen that story it works and it just a part of the process. (J4)

The more emphatically the political PR can convince the journalist the story is not worth covering the greater their success.

A sixth tactic is raising the issue of political bias, either by alleging prejudice against the interviewer or more generally accusing specific journalists of holding a political bias. These allegations undermine the journalist's knowledge and their viewpoints. One journalist told me a colleague of his had been involved in an incident where Peter Mandelson told him he wanted to:

'Make him more balanced'. He used to blame all his views on his Tory party background and suggest this was why he was unbalanced. Making people question his judgement, when it was not even in dispute before. This was one of his techniques. This is not out of date and it can still happen. (J2)

Political PRs have also been known to pit journalists against each other in such a way as to divide and rule (P1). Campbell was known for doing this and openly admitted it stating that "if the Government's case is being misrepresented in one part of the media and I think it is a good idea to go to another part of the media to try to redress the balance" (Campbell, 2000b: 7-20). This tactic involves playing:

People off against each other by saying 'we gave some information to the other journalists.' (J2).

As well as using it as a controlling technique against journalists it can be used as a way of ensuring that information is covered in the way which will give the political PR the most advantageous outcome. It also allows political PRs to target the journalist with the least politically aggressive angle.

Normally, if we want to go into specific details of stories we will talk to the specialists – if we want something to be looked at more generally and in a wider context we will give a story to the political correspondent. (PC4)

It is easier to give most stories to Westminster journalists as they don't have time to check the facts, and they do not have the in depth knowledge of specific stories. But sometimes we would give a story to the specialists if we knew it was a strong story, especially for economics and education. (PC1)

This was reiterated by many interviewees who said that they will not routinely give a story to one type of journalist or another but assess who should get each story and how they would be most

likely to cover it. They may well insist on saying a story is political so that it is not given to the specialists who would be able to easily locate any spin in the story.

Another method of this approach involves giving stories directly to regional papers in the knowledge they will be given an easier time, either having a press release published in its entirety, or allowing special advisors to write whole editorials. This is justified by a former party communications director:

Regional papers have the highest audience figures, Number 10 use this route a lot and even have a dedicated person (David Bradshaw) who just writes articles to be syndicated to them. This is a very effective communications strategy. (PC5)

A political PR who was working during the Tory sleaze onslaught found the tactic of going to regional and local papers very helpful.

It was about befriending who you know was trying to do something different. Finding someone who can appreciate it more than others. Like giving stories to the South West correspondent rather than the political correspondent and giving them tip offs and gossip. (PC3)

A final successful media strategy being used is setting the rules of engagement early on. This is what has often been labelled by Barnett and Gaber as 'spinning.' They discuss how it can be seen at the political party conferences held every autumn where a few days before the leader's speeches take place, political PRs will leak the gist of the speech to the Sunday papers, then the day before will brief a few selected daily papers and on the morning itself put a senior MP up for the Today programme to discuss what 'might' be included in the speech. During the speech the PRs will explain to journalists interpretations of phrases and afterwards they will debrief the media. These activities determine that, for three days, the news agenda is firmly focused on the agenda that has been set by the political PR – the speech sets the agenda for the party for the next year so it is important politically and thus the media have little choice but to follow the terms of engagement the PRs establish.²²

In general, the rule is that if you are not there in the beginning then not much happens but the story will usually be followed up so if you make sure you have a comment to 'move the story on' then you can "surf the wave" of publicity. You should get your comments in before other agencies so that you get to set the terms of engagement – not them. (P4)

²² These rules of engagement are discussed by Franklin (1994: 145) and Jones (1995: 19-26 & 64).

Setting the terms not only refers to the content of a story but also the way the interview is placed in the programme, the order in which other interviewees might be heard as well as the actual area of questioning (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 102). Jones talks about ministers who demand guarantees about the likely lines of questioning before agreeing to take part; senior politicians who try to pick and choose their place in a programme's running order so as to get a peak-time slot and those who attempt to exercise a veto over the choice of other studio guests. Programmes which step out of line are easily punished and politicians will refuse to appear if they dislike the presenter or if they feel they have been offended or slighted in the past (Jones, 1995: 19). This is not one individual tactic however, it goes on all the time, over every story and "there is constant haggling over the rules of engagement (Franklin, 1994: 145). These tactics can be, and often are, used by a specific political PR in order to ensure that information or viewpoints are put across in the most effective manner for their purpose.

Beyond these attitudinal tactics there are also physical methods of information dissemination which are used in order to ensure the information is covered as favourably as possible. These relate more to the political PRs relationship with their information as opposed to their relationship with the journalist.

6.4.2.2 *Dissemination of information*

The tactics used to disseminate information effectively to the media by political PRs were learnt from business public relations (Miller & Dinan, 2000). These include sophisticated data management to ensure instant rebuttal of hostile points, to the "the centralised running of election campaign from a single 'war room' following a written 'war book' and the insistence that everyone on the campaign is 'on message' at all times" (Hargreaves, 2003: 194).²³ The dispersal methods are much more proactive and are usually used to push out information and to make sure that the information the political PR wants to release is covered in the news media. Along these lines there were eight main specific tactics which were discussed by interviewees when looking at the physical dissemination of information to the media by civil servants, party communicators and special advisors. These tactics do not include the basic press office activities such as writing and sending out press releases or phoning journalists to give advance warnings of photo opportunities; as these are the staple diet for every press office, political or not. The tactics discussed below are the below the line, less documented, more auspicious tactics. They include (1) the Heineken approach, (2) being ahead of the media, (3) kite-flying, (4) manipulating deadlines, (5) leaking, (6) pre-briefing, (7) background briefing and (8) shortening or extending the validity of a story.

The first group of tactics have been labelled 'the Heineken approach' (Cockerell, 2003: 575) as they reach the parts of the media that traditional PR techniques would not. They also often bypass

²³ See also Bartle & Griffiths (2001: 10).

the news media and go directly to other media avenues which are less hostile and more likely to give a positive reception. This bypassing can be done in four ways by giving stories to (a) 'fluffier' publications such as magazine programmes or chat shows, (b) regional and local publications, tailored to their specific needs, (c) diary columnists, leader writers and features teams and (d) the internet.

A recent development has been for politicians to limit their appearances on heavyweight political programmes like *Panorama* and *Newsnight* and appear instead on chat shows or in women's magazines to try and show their more 'human' side.²⁴ To do this they bypass the news editors or news journalists' papers and focus on getting coverage in the feature sections, by speaking on daytime television shows, chat shows, on their own internet sites or by writing pieces for newspapers themselves. Since 1997, Tony Blair has appeared alongside David Frost, Richard and Judy, Des O'Connor and two ten year old boys called 'Little Ant and Dec'. One former Downing Street Press Officer says the press office has in recent times "more keenly targeted specialist titles, such as ethnic minorities or lifestyle media" (Hall, 2003).²⁵ Not only does it mean the Prime Minister gets an easier ride, but by using these less conventional non news methods it means that the Prime Minister, and his policies, are taken "to those parts of the voting public that other programmes cannot reach" (Cockerell, 2003: 575). This view was substantiated in my interviews.

They know that is it easier to give women's stories to FeMail and if they want to get away from politics they go to Richard and Judy. (PC3)

One political PR talked about how it is essential to locate those journalists who are more favourably disposed to what the government, party or organisation are doing. In his case at the time it was the leader writers and features teams whose views were matching his own.

Now talking a lot more to leader writers and feature writers – people who don't automatically get spoken to. (SA6)

Political PRs also now make use of electronic media and publish unfiltered information directly on to the Internet. Information such as the September dossier, the Hutton enquiry evidence and all the Lewinsky papers were done in this way. Now political PRs are bypassing the traditional news media to get to other audiences and utilise technology to do so.

A further tactic, or in this case, a special skill necessary for political PRs, is to be ahead of the media and to push out stories which accommodate and utilise this.

²⁴ For more on this see Scammell (2003: 517).

²⁵ In the 2005 election the three major party leaders gave interviews to *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* Magazine.

The only way to influence journalists is to spend as much time as possible with journalists and by knowing what the story is for the next day. You are failing in your job if you do not spot it early. Trying to kill stuff is a million times harder. (SA2)

The political PR always needs to be ahead of the news media cycle, second guessing what is likely to make a story, what will interest journalists and how to either play that up, if it will be in your favour, or diminish it, if it will damage you.

A third tactic, kite flying, is the process of putting out a story on a policy change to see how it will 'fly' with the public. "Sunday newspapers have always been regarded by politicians as a good platform for their views and a useful means of floating controversial proposals" (Jones, 1995: 129) and the journalists interviewed agreed. Special advisors in particular use this to see how a policy would play with the media or public and to test reactions,²⁶ using the media as an alternative to focus groups or questionnaires. If a policy is sold well by the media to the public then the special advisor will feel more confident at pushing the policy to the minister. Tony Blair's press officer, David Hill, has said that since 1994, the Labour Party has used the media to float ideas, get discussions going, prepare the ground (Davis, 2003: 680). If there is a strong reaction against it however then a policy idea will not be taken any further.

A further tactic in the political PR's proactive repertoire involves manipulating journalist's deadlines. Political PRs make it their business to know the deadline for every newspaper and broadcast outlet. They utilise this knowledge by timing their releases of information in ways which are most advantageous to themselves. If political PRs are keen to get a story onto the news or onto a specific programme they will ensure it arrives with the journalist well before deadline. If they are keen to hide a story or prevent the information from getting too wide a distribution they will release it only a few minutes before a deadline. Journalists then won't have time to read and digest the full contents and will have no time to scour the detail of the findings. This means they must follow the political PRs 'helpful briefings' and write reports before "many critical passages were spotted" (Ingham, 2003). One journalist I spoke to said this was a common tactic:

On a Friday the MoD will put out a release at 5:55pm so it is too late for the six o'clock and if it makes it we don't have time to check it out. (J2)

The timing of releases can also ensure as few people as possible see a story, such as putting out bad news on Fridays in time for the Saturday papers (Negrine, 1994: 134). This can also be used to 'throw out the bodies,' putting out a release when journalists are distracted by other stories. A prime example of this is the Jo Moore case where she directed those working for her to put out negative or damaging stories on September 11, 2001 as it was obvious that the scale of the disaster

²⁶ For more description see Gaber (2003: 14).

in New York would prevent any other stories being reported.²⁷ “It is not a difficult matter simply to put out a press release either at a very busy time when journalists are distracted by other stories or conversely at a very quiet time (such as during Parliamentary recess) when few journalists are around” (Gaber, 2003: 15).

Co-ordinating the release of several stories is another way that deadlines can be manipulated. One example of this is ‘laundering’; releasing lots of stories at once, putting out the bad news at the same time as the good news. If the political PR can make the good news look exciting enough, and the bad news look very dull, then the good news story will take precedence. “If the technique is well-practised, the timing and presentation of the good news will succeed in relegating the bad news to the inside pages” (Gaber, 2003: 16). Whilst any of these tactics could be seen as callous and unprofessional, they occur with surprising regularity.

Leaking is a particularly well discussed tactic²⁸ and leaks are used so frequently in Westminster that numerous Parliamentary written questions, points of order and Early Day Motions have been tabled on their use and an entire public enquiry (Hutton) was based on who leaked, or authorised a leak, of what information, to whom. Leaks have been used for decades and are used to “send up trial balloons on policy proposals or for discrediting another person and their position” (Alger, 1996: 250) and are “almost always carried out with a very specific purpose in mind” (Brunson, 2000: 247). “The reward for politicians is either setting the agenda and dictating the terms of the argument or testing an idea before publicly backing it” (Golding et al, 1986: 104). However there is a problem for journalists, as they are rarely able to get a second source to back up a fact or story.

A version of leaking is ‘pre-empting’, which is described as ensuring a story remains a ‘one day wonder’ by issuing a statement to all papers (usually when one has it as an exclusive) confirming a story instead of waiting for the newspaper story to appear (Gaber, 2003: 13). A further version involves purposely raising or lowering expectation in a story so that a public expecting the worst are happier when they get something better.

A well used tactic by all political PRs is pre-briefing. This involves giving a story to one particular publication or programme in advance of its official release in order to get more positive coverage. The unwritten expectation is that the recipient journalist writes the story in a more positive manner to reward the political PR for giving them the exclusive. Instances of pre-briefing increased significantly after the 1997 election due to changes in the rules for special advisors (J3). It is considered to be a successful tactic because the pack mentality of journalists encourages all journalists to cover a story once one has done so.

²⁷ See case study at 6.6.

²⁸ See Tiffin (1989: 97-123), Negrine (1996: 35-38), Golding et al (1986: 104), Gaber (2003: 13) and Brunson (2000: 247).

I used pre-briefing on stories, this worked because the lobby press tend to take a collective view on things and this is my critique of the press, that they are a pack and they are afraid to disagree with all the others. (PC1)

On top of pre-briefing, political PRs can also give background briefings. A backgrounder is where a politician “discusses developments and issues with one or more reporters but with the understanding that the material will not be directly attributed to that person” (Alger, 1996: 248). These will consist of one-to-ones with journalists, filling them in on private information, which is very clearly not for dissemination but which gives the journalist a greater understanding of the issues involved. It is a significant part of the political PRs job but the recommendations of the Phillis committee were to cut this role out of the job of Number 10’s Communications Director. This has worried many in the media.

So if it works we will have better system but will have David Hill who is very good but he won’t have anything to do unless he gives background briefings to the press – which will have to be one-to-one’s and this will be against the committee’s recommendations. (J1)

Background briefings are essential for journalists to be able to understand stories and issues yet the negativity towards them as highlighted during Hutton and the Phillis enquiry could threaten their usage.

The last tactic, involves shortening or extending the validity of a story. One way, firebreaking, involves a big story being put out to provide a “deliberately constructed diversion to take journalists off the scent of an embarrassing story that seems, in the journalistic parlance, to have developed legs” (Gaber, 2003: 11).²⁹ This means that media focus shifts away from something that the political PR sees as giving them a negative image and onto something which portrays them more positively. An example of this was when Robin Cook was revealed as having had an affair with his secretary. Once Alistair Campbell discovered that *News of the World* would be publishing this story, the *Sunday Times* was given a story about MI6 investigating Chris Patten and Mandelson went onto *The World This Weekend* and said the government was thinking about reprieving the Royal Yacht (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 108-9). The tactic was successful and the next day, not one broadsheet paper led on the Robin Cook story (Kampfner, 1998: 158).

The opposite to firebreaking is where a political PR will find ways of keeping a story running for as long as possible, either when it is positive-(milking a story) or when it is negative towards the opposition (stoking the fire). Stoking the fire allows a political PR to squeeze a story to extend the

²⁹ See also Barnett & Gaber (2001: 108) and McKie (1982: 180).

amount of coverage they receive, releasing more and more information as the days go along in order to keep a story running. Adding case studies, offering articles, suggesting ideas for features will all add interest for journalists to continue discussing a story.

6.4.3 Technology

A final area of importance here is, that, whilst many of the tactics of information dissemination and the attitude of political PRs have changed, it is also the case that the increased use of technology within the news media has encouraged political PRs to update their methods of information delivery and become more technologically sophisticated. Political PRs have had to adapt to work alongside the technologies used by the news media of the 21st century. They are now using the journalists' amended deadlines to schedule their news releases or briefings more successfully, and they, like the news media, are also utilising technology, but in their case, using it for procedures such as rapid rebuttal. When Labour began to crank up their communication systems in preparation for the 1997 election they made the most of the technology available. They put into effect new electoral technology from the United States: the giant media war-room and the 24-hour monitoring of television, radio, press and internet outlets (Osborne & Walters, 2004: 123). A wealthy supporter donated a rapid rebuttal system called Excalibur which provided instant retrieval of information on not only opponents, but also on the preoccupations of individual journalists (Goddard, 2001: 127) and the party issued their staff with pagers and mobile phones to ensure the "party spoke with one voice" (Bartle & Griffiths, 2001: 10).³⁰

The use of technology is also advantageous for it means mistakes can be rectified with speed.

Technology means what is wrong can be changed very quickly. (PC6)

Technology is intrinsic to the way Labour run their government. Their media monitoring unit provides a round the clock service to departments and Downing Street and flags up news stories as they develop. They also have a computer information system called AGENDA which holds listings of forthcoming newsworthy events, lines to take, key messages and themes and speeches (Select Committee on Public Administration, 1998: 107). As well as this, electronic systems were developed to provide ministers MPs and constituency parties with instant access to up-to-the minute briefings on the latest facts and figures from the Department of Health (Jones, 1999: 75).

A further development is that political PRs can utilise the internet and other new technologies (such as text messaging) to prevent politicians having their messages diluted by the news media. Many MPs now have personal blogs and the idea was also adopted by the New Labour government after their 1997 election win and Blair gave a weekly web cast and posted the lobby

³⁰ See also Butler and Kavanagh (1997: 56-9).

briefing on the site as a “way of communicating directly with people” (Cockerell, 2000). The web site received about 4 million hits a week. When being interviewed by Michael Cockerell for his documentary ‘News from Number 10’ Blair is asked about his web casts. He says “it is a way of connecting directly with people. It is in a language that can come more direct to people so they have more of a chance of hearing the extended argument” (Cockerell, 2000). This method is not always successful however as groups can find that once a message is out in the virtual world there is very little chance to rein it back in again (Gregory, 2000: 38-39) and, tellingly, Blair no longer does his webcasts. A recent use of technology to communicate directly with the public backfired when the creation of e-petitions on the Number Ten website saw nearly 2 million signatures campaign against road pricing proposals. This highlights that there can be a negative side to the amount that political PRs rely on technology for their work. As discussed above, many of the attitudinal tactics used by political PRs do not flatter their profession.

The methods of delivery have changed, now more is by email or text. But after the Jo Moore incident people are more wary of using this traceable technology. (PC3)

Whilst the use of new technologies allows political PRs speedy information delivery, it is traceable and this can have serious damaging effects, not only on democracy, but on their own livelihoods and on the image of the political public relations industry.

6.5 Increased importance of political PRs

Now we have established the growth in the numbers of political PRs, what they do, who they are and what procedures and tactics they have available to them we must also analyse the one other significant change since Tunstall’s time, their importance. It seems the importance of all political PRs has increased dramatically.³¹ Political PRs, whether special advisors or the lowliest of the party press office assistants, have used the facilities and tactics available to them in such a way that the manner of their job has changed exponentially and their power levels within their organisations have increased significantly. Their increased importance reflects the fact that the modern political party or government department realises how important a positive image in the news media is to them.

Understanding the media is a very important trait. (PC1)

Now we are more worried about what the Mail will say about us. (PR1)

³¹ There are numerous accounts of changes in the importance of media in politics and it was something discussed regularly throughout my interviews. However it is such a huge topic that it would make a PhD on its own and thus is not being covered here. For discussions of the changes however see: Brebner (1949), Cockerell et al (1984), Ingham (1991), Jones (1999), McNair (1999), Osborne (1999), Riddell (2000), Scammell (2000), Seymore-Ure (2000), Cutlip et al (2000), Wring (2001), Barnett and Gaber (2001), Seldon (2003), Osborne & Walters (2004), and Phillis (2004)

This is a new development, certainly since the time of Tunstall's research. Sir Christopher Meyer, John Major's press secretary has said when he began he could not even get early editions of newspapers. He was told to get them from his local newsagent in Putney (Meyer, 2000: 6-15). This increased importance now goes beyond just the supplying of facilities and understanding of the need for day to day activities; it encompasses a whole new strategic approach. Much of this change in government took place when Labour won the election in 1997. It is disputed though how many of the changes occurred when Labour got elected in 1997 or whether they are part of a longer term change. The interviewees were split between these two viewpoints. Those who say there has been a dramatic change since 1997 associate this with the structural changes in the facilities provided to political PRs which were made in 1997. Alistair Campbell has said the "information service was not equipped to deal with 24 hour news media. It was often slow to respond to media enquiries and insufficiently proactive" (Scammell, 2003: 520-1). Some special advisors spoke about how they did not even have email, daily newspapers or even mobile phones when they joined government (SA2).

It wasn't about spin, it was about the speed of communications...there was no sense of urgency with the civil service press officers. There was a mismatch of professionalism... Before New Labour came in they were doing a different job. They had not caught up with the modern media. If you are a large monolithic organisation why should you respond to the media? (SA5)

When Labour won the election they were able to (because the civil service was so demoralised) march their own team straight into Downing Street and the special advisors were able to become much more important than they had been in the past. (PO2)

Others say that the changes are simply a reaction to the media and to technological changes and they are consistent throughout the parties – not just Labour. All Labour has really done, Campbell says, is to get on the same terms as the Conservatives. Nothing is fundamentally different from its more successful predecessors; it has simply and sensibly adapted to the era of modern media and new communications technology (Scammell, 2003: 510).

There has been an accumulation of small quantitative changes which have accounted to qualitative changes. In 1974 they still did briefings but the quantity was very different. Peter Mandelson was the first great breakthrough – no-one else came near that. The Prime Minister had always had effective press officers but Peter Mandelson professionalised it. The Labour Party had a man called Percy Clarke and one assistant, maybe two. But that was it. This was very different to now. (SA4)

One of the justifications for how this new era began in 1997 is down to the massively increased importance given by Labour to bringing high levels of media monitoring into government. Cockerell however discusses one of Thatcher's election campaigns where "the Conservatives monitored and transcribed every single radio and television programme on the election. Transcripts were available for the 7:30 meeting to help decide how the Prime Minister should respond to questions arising from the previous night's broadcasts at her morning press conference" (Cockerell et al, 1984: 211). This reveals that it is not as new as many would make out. The journalist Peter Riddell agrees: "May 1997 was not year zero though it is often treated as such, by both defenders and critics of New Labour" (Riddell, 2000: 162).

Another example of the increased importance of communication in politics is a trend towards synchronisation. This involves situations where all decisions on communications go through one person and where a centralisation of messages occurs. When speaking to political PRs who worked in government before 1997, it seems that there have been periods before when all communication decisions were expected to go through one person but this was not uniform. One former number 10 press officer (who worked during Thatcher's leadership) said

It was a very tight ship which was run – everything either went through Bernard Ingham or the Private Secretary. (PO2)

Centralisation works particularly well when a political PR is very close to their boss (such as Bernard Ingham with Margaret Thatcher or Alistair Campbell with Tony Blair) as it becomes easy for them to "frequently articulate their own minister's perspective" (P6) and so all other communication officers know that to go through them will ensure their action has the approval of their overall boss. Many interviewees stated that the first thing that the Labour Party did was to "centralise department messages" (PO2) and this seems very similar to how Thatcher worked when she centralised the communications before it fragmented again under John Major. The synchronisation of communications has contributed to the increase in the power of political PRs as they are better placed strategically when all decisions go through one person and messages are centralised. The recognition of the importance of understanding the media by those conducting political public relations for government has also helped.

The final area to increase the importance of political PRs is that the processes of contact building with the media at all levels are now accepted as essential. A departmental press officer says his contact with the media takes place:

All day, every day...Part of contact building is going out and drinking with journalists.
(PO3)

A former special advisor said that this contact building is essential as:

Journalists are like lions, if you do not feed them, they feed on you. So it is good to fill them up on a constant feed of stories. If you do not provide stories then they make them up. I spoke to all of them daily. (SA2)

A concern though about the growth in importance of political PRs, especially those who work for the government, is that they are not answerable to the House of Commons. They are not members of the Commons and they do not depend on it for finance so whilst they are accountable to their boss, responses to their behaviour seldom take place in public. Thus political PRs in politics, however enthusiastic, dedicated and loyal to their government or party, may find themselves in positions of exceptional privilege, holding power but at the same time standing exempt from many of the more usual restraints on its use.³²

6.6 Case Study: 'A good day to bury bad news'

On September 11th 2001, as the world was watching the coverage of the terrorist attacks in New York, a British special advisor, Jo Moore, realized that the event was so momentous that the next day's papers would be focused on one story and one story only. She saw this as the perfect opportunity to publish information which would reflect negatively on the department she worked for. This common, every day, tactic was, however, carried out in a way that was seen as heartless, calculating and cynical. On top of this, she did it on email and thus incriminated herself forever more.

After the Jo Moore incident people are more wary of using this traceable technology.

You choose your friends but you cover you traces. Important to keep it clean. (PC3)

Moore, the special advisor to the Transport Secretary Stephen Byers, advised her department's press office that the attacks on the USA would make it a "good day to bury bad news". Not only was her language highly inappropriate in the circumstances but her email was leaked by someone within the department and this signalled the beginning of the end of her political career³³. The issue of New Labour spin rose to the top of the news agenda and as more accusations began to be made, two Commons debates took place, more emails were leaked and there was continuous briefing and counter-briefing going on to journalists by different members of the department. The open conflict between the press office and the special advisors meant that eventually it was announced that both Jo Moore and the Head of Press, civil servant Martin Sixsmith, had resigned. Moore admitted she had become a liability yet Sixsmith fought hard against his resignation and

³² For more on this see Windlesham (1966: 254).

³³ She has now retrained to be a primary school teacher.

this ensured the case didn't close quietly. The Commons Public Administration Committee investigated what had happened and Bob Phillis was asked to set up a separate committee to look into the role of special advisors and their relationships with civil service press officers.

This case provides numerous examples to back up what was said by my interviewees on how, in the early 21st century, special advisors work with civil service press officers, their relationship with all their colleagues and the range of tactics they use. The memo written on that day was not out of the ordinary or particularly unusual – it just incensed the news media, and gave them a perfect way to highlight to the public about the sorts of tactics being carried out daily within a government trying to control the news agenda – and the journalists following it.

6.6.1 The role of the Special Advisor

The activities of a special adviser can encompass any of several job descriptions. Some are focused entirely on departmental specialised policy, some are gatekeepers to their ministers and others work almost solely with the news media. They inhabit an ill-defined overlap between party politics and the administration and are seen by many as backroom boys, manipulating the media, overriding civil servants and bullying journalists. The briefings and counter briefings which came out of this issue certainly indicated that this was going on in this department (DTLR) at this time. A key requirement of the role is that, as they are a political appointee in a civil service environment, they act discretely and without causing contention. Moore failed this entirely and her activities were classed by Tony Wright, Chair of the Commons Public Administration Committee, as being “inconsistent with any notion of public service”. Once information about Moore began to have higher news salience than the information about the department she was supposed to be representing she had to resign. She had become the story.

The changes in the news media in the last thirty five years have meant that there is far more time and space to fill and this means there is an increased appetite for news from journalists. Political PRs are in a perfect position to feed this and a key requirement of the special advisor is to be able to understand how, and when, to feed this appetite. They need to understand how the news media works. They need to be able to predict how reporters might think and react in any given set of circumstances. Whilst being neither subtle nor low-profile with her actions, Moore did fulfil this to the limit. She understood that the New York attacks would take all precedence in the news media the next day and that the information she had to give out (which she wanted to get as little coverage as possible) would be unlikely to be picked up by journalists.

6.6.2 The Civil Service Press Officer

The code of conduct for departmental press officers says that they are required to be neutral, to provide information to journalists but not to hold a party political stance on it. Martin Sixsmith (the press officer involved but also a former journalist himself), showed his ability to understand how a journalist thinks and what information they will need in an email he sent to Byers stating that the death of Princess Margaret should not provide an opportunity for more information to be released. This does fulfil the requirements to be neutral and non-party political, however Sixsmith was eventually 'resigned' following accusations of briefing journalists on the work that Moore was doing inside the department. This was neither neutral nor to the advantage of the department.

6.6.3 The relationship between civil servants and special advisors

There were numerous examples in this case of the poor relations between special advisors and the civil service press offices in the Department for Transport at this time. Sir Richard Mottram, the most senior Transport Department civil servant, told the Commons Public Administration Committee, that the tension stemmed from Moore thinking that the civil service press officers were unprofessional and not up to the job.

Sir Richard told MPs that the main area of contention between politically-appointed special advisers and permanent civil service staff was in their relations with the news media and that the divisions of information separation concerned him. The situation was so bad, he said, that civil servants had now got into the habit of playing "spot who briefed about what" to see which pieces of information that had originated from ministers and which had come from "different bits of the machine." He said "we must guard against there being a special advisers network around which one set of information is going and an official network around which another set of information is going and the twain aren't necessarily linked up. Because you can get very bad decisions out of that" (Select Committee in Public Administration, 2002; evidence para 327). If the process of briefing the press was not coherent, he said, then the government could get into trouble. This is exactly what happened in this situation.

It is all behind the hand stuff. Just what we have had before when Alistair Campbell was briefing widely but doing lots of political manoeuvring and Phillis said this must be cleaned up and if this works this will give them a line of protection. (J1)

Special advisors, as political appointees, knowing they only have a limited term in power can take a presidential stance towards taking risks and the attitude they portray. Press officers, as civil servants, with a life-time career in government will be more cautious, less political and think in the 'longer-term. This will bring the two groups into conflict, yet when they must both work with

journalists, often on behalf of the same department or minister, they need to be giving a co-ordinated agreed line. For this to occur, there needs to be an understanding of exactly how work is to be split between the two groups and a reminder to all that civil service press officers must remain politically impartial.

A spin doctor, depending on who paying is almost out of control. Such as the case with Jo Moore and Martin Sixsmith. If a spin doctor is put into a department then they should be answerable to that department's permanent secretary. (P6)

In Moore's case, the lack of understanding and sensitivity between the two groups (special advisors and civil servants) led to a massive breakdown in trust, damaged three careers (Moore, Sixsmith & Byers) and risked the reputation of a government department. The most important part of any relationship between political PRs and journalists is trust. Once levels of trust have diminished, a political journalist will not use a political PR and a political PR will not give any but the most basic information to a journalist.

Until Blair, the heads of information in government departments were trustworthy. Blair politicised them and, as the Jo Moore case showed, it did not always work. (J5)

The Phillis commission is concerned about a meltdown in the level of trust in government information and political journalists are part of the problem as well, as we are not coming clean with audiences. I don't think we are doing the public a good service. (J3)

This case got so complicated that the Prime Minister's spokesman, Goderic Smith, inadvertently lied to lobby correspondents risking his own credibility and forcing him to back track. He was furious. On top of this, when the political PRs relationship with their boss (the person they are speaking on behalf of) starts to falter, journalists become unsure of whether they can trust that what the political PR is saying is actually what the minister means. A special advisor who is not honest and straight will, to begin with, be able to get away with a lot. Once political journalists realise the information they are being fed is unreliable they will never be trusted again and their tenure as a special advisor will be all but over. Moore's resignation came when she realized that she no longer had the trust of the journalists and that it was impossible to do her job effectively without it.³⁴

³⁴ BBC coverage of story: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1821731.stm (as viewed 31/12/06).

Mottram, and many others since, called for a new law defining the relationship between civil servants and government and a code of conduct for special advisers has now been introduced³⁵ and sets out clearer demarcation lines between spin doctors and officials.

6.6.4 Political PR tactics

Leaking was highly prevalent in this case. Emails and letters were leaked and even after Sixsmith was 'resigned' he briefed that he had been pushed out. The head of the Government Information and Communication Service, Mike Granatt sent out emails to staff headed 'leaks', saying: "I will not defend any member of the GICS who acts in this way. Anyone who feels so strongly that they wish to act outside the Civil Service code should do the honourable thing and resign." A departmental spokesman said that a deplorable 'game' had been going on, with members of the Transport Department's media section trying to undermine Ms Moore. "There are people within the department who will hide behind anonymity and do everything possible to undermine Jo Moore and the department and the secretary of state," said the spokesman³⁶.

The main tactic highlighted by this case however is the skill necessary for political PRs to be ahead of the media and to push out stories which accommodate and utilise this. The political PR always needs to be ahead of the news media cycle, second guessing what is likely to make a story, what will interest journalists and how to either play that up, if it will be in your favour, or diminish it if it will damage you. This most certainly occurred in this case where information was pushed out to diminish the changes of coverage. The timing of this release would have been perfect to ensure as few people see a story as possible. The tactic, known as throwing out the bodies, allows a political PR to put out a release when journalists are distracted by other stories.

All in all, the Moore case highlighted many of the elements of modern political PR. Whilst this situation was based in one department at a specific time it must be noted that the reason journalists leapt on the case and made such a large news story out of it was that they were quite used to seeing it happen and had now found an example that they could use to educate the public about the situation with which journalists were working day in and day out.

6.7 Conclusion

The research discussed in this chapter was focused on analysing the structures, processes and people who supply political information to the news media. The material gathered from the interviews was aimed at providing evidence to establish the structure of political public relations,

³⁵ Code of Conduct for Special Advisers: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety_and_ethics/special_advisers/code/index.asp (as viewed 31/12/06).

³⁶ Goderic Smith in the Daily Number 10 Press Conference. Thursday 14 February 2002. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1821731.stm (as viewed 31/12/06).

to develop a profile of the typical political PR, to understand how political PRs from different areas interact and to highlight the facilities and tactics available to political PRs. Ultimately, the research was aimed at discovering how political organisations incorporate the requirements and processes of the modern news media into their communication organisation, strategy and policies.

The structure of modern political public relations has been highly influenced by the characteristics of the modern news media. It involves a mirroring of structures within news organisations, matching the round the clock mentality, extensively increasing in size to accommodate the increase in calls from the greater number of media outlets and a significant professionalisation to defend themselves against pressurised and competitive journalists who have a greedy appetite for information controversy in order to raise ratings. This greediness, and the result of media owners now focusing on business rather than political gain, has one other significant implication for the structure of political public relations. They have established political public relations as a tool for not only disseminating information, but also for obscuring it, ensuring negative stories are kept out of the news media. This means a split within the structure of staff of political organisations so some conduct proactive PR and some focus on the reactive.

The profile of a typical political PR (departmental civil service press officers, special advisors and those working for the party communications departments) is one of a determined, highly educated, self-confident, approachable person who has a great amount of foresight. The most important skill for them however is to understand how the news media works, how a journalist thinks and what information they will need. The more knowledgeable about the news media, the easier it is for them to double guess the interest in a story and any likely reactions to it, and the easier it is to imagine the worst-case scenario. Their knowledge is usually a result of the circular nature of the political news industry with many political PRs having previously worked as journalists. The political PR also needs to be trusted, by both journalists, and by the politician for whom they work. A political PR who is not trusted by journalists will never have their information covered (or retracted) and if their boss does not trust them they will not be given the stories to feed to the news media in the first place. A final element of their profile is that not only must they temper their personality to work with journalists; they must work positively and advantageously with their fellow political PRs as these personal relationships are intrinsic to their success.

The work of political PRs has become more complex to match the increase in the size of the news media, competitiveness and tabloidisation, and there has been become a far greater need for procedures, tactics and technologies with which to assist their attempt to communicate with journalists. There are sets of procedures which have been developed for political PRs in order to increase their control over the information they release to the media. The main ones include daily briefing sessions, a strategic grid of all activities, meticulous monitoring, the use of rapid rebuttal and a key themes unit for disseminating positive messages.

The specific tactics used by political PRs to encourage, or prevent news media coverage can be split into those which are above and below the line. Above the line (most often conducted by departmental press officers) are used universally in many PR offices and are by no means specific to politics. Below the line activities however are more covert and often cover a more strategic emphasis, and are often highly concentrated within the political world. Below the line tactics can be split into two groups. Those that are based on a political PRs' attitude, such as trying to withhold or correct information, and those more proactive tactics which provide ways of disseminating political information.

The attitudinal tactics include bullying and intimidation, complaining, punishment, favouritism, implying to journalists that their stories are not worth covering, questioning their political bias and impartiality, pitting journalists against each other and setting the terms of engagement. These tactics were all mentioned with significant regularity by my interviewees. The mainly proactive tactics surrounding the dissemination of information include The Heineken approach, being ahead of the media, kite-flying, manipulating deadlines, leaking, pre-briefings, background briefings and shortening or extending the validity of a story. Technology is also used by political PRs to increase their opportunities to control the news media. They use technology for rapid rebuttal, constant monitoring, scheduling their announcements and to bypass negative 'traditional' news media outlets.

The changes in the news media, and the increased use of the above tactics, have significantly increased the importance of political PRs. Their levels of power within government or political parties have risen dramatically. Their knowledge is now utilised from an early stage in the political process and political PRs now have a constant place at the table, advising on policy and its implications rather than simply giving out information on the end product. Their success however, depends entirely on their relationship with journalists and it is this which will be considered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN – THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL PRS AND JOURNALISTS

This chapter sets out to analyse and conceptualise the nature of the relationship between political journalists and PRs. Along the route, the chapter will explore the basis of power within the political news industry, ascertain the current relationship and attempt to pin point those who wield the balance of power, the journalists or the political PRs. This will encompass many of the theories and concepts set out in chapter two and consider the various notions of power domination in the relationship.

Research question: What is the current nature of the relationship between political journalists and political PRs?

Aim: To consider a model to highlight the role of power and influence dependency in the political news industry.

Aim: To conduct a full investigation of the current relationship between journalists and political PRs.

Aim: To establish an analysis and appraisal of who wields the balance of power in this relationship and the elements by which this relationship is controlled.

7.1 Introduction

"The press can enter into no close or binding alliances with the statesmen of the day, nor can it surrender its permanent interests to the convenience of the ephemeral power of any government."

(Delane, 1800s)

Delane's idealist viewpoint fits the notion of the news media as a fourth estate within a perfect liberal democracy. Unfortunately, the many tensions in the political news industry make this objective, whilst honourable, impractical. The developments in the news media (chapter five) and the related installation of a political public relations industry (chapter six) means that there are now many more players in the political news industry and these players have greater pressures, more competitive aims and are working within a far more negative image of their industry. This suggests that the news media (or press as they were in the 1800s) must connect in a very different manner with 'the statesmen of the day' (the politicians). In 21st century terminology this means that political journalists must engage heavily and continuously with, not only the statesmen of the

day but also their mouthpieces, their political PRs. The engagement is not one sided however and political journalists do not have the luxury of taking on political PRs on their own terms, at their own leisure. They must work with political PRs on a daily basis to elicit the information they require, to question them on policy viewpoints and to develop future opportunities for exclusives. They must have a relationship.

To understand how this relationship works, who is involved and what each side brings to the table it is essential to consider the elements of power on each side and look at how these feed into the relationship. This will then allow an analysis of the spread of power within the relationship and an investigation of who has control of what. Finally, I will look at the day-to-day relationship to see, from the practitioners viewpoints, who is the political news gatekeeper, if indeed there is one at all.

7.2 The issue of power within the relationship

Power in the political communications industry resides primarily in two places: with the politicians and the news media. Their roles, responsibilities and powers are intertwined within the idealism of a separation of powers and fourth estate news media (see chapter two). The public voices of the politicians and the news media (the political PRs and journalists) do not have any specific powers per se, but they can be, and often are, powerful. Their ability to possess this power however is entirely dependent on others and, it seems, comes from two sources: their bosses and their opposite number in the political news industry.

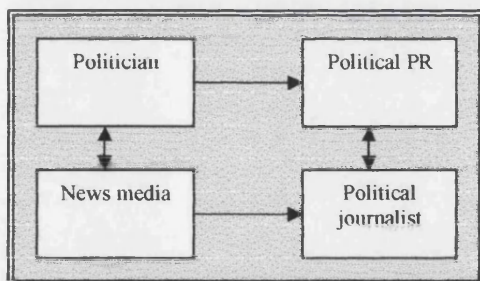


Chart 7a: Direct power in the political news industry, J. Perry.

Initially, as chart 7a highlights, the power of the political PR or journalist lies significantly with their boss; either the politician or the news media organisation. It is only through their relationship with these entities that the political PR and journalist gain their power. Beyond this however, with regards to their rivals, a politician (and thus their political PR) is dependent upon the news media (and thus the journalist) to spread their messages. The news media are dependent on the politicians for content. Within the news media journalists are fully dependent on political PRs for their information, just as political PRs are dependent on journalists to deliver their messages through the news media. This mutual dependency was described by a special advisor.

They each want something from each other. Politicians want to get their stuff out, either events or policies, political or personal and politicians realise they can't reach the public without going through the media but they would love to if they could but no-one will go to public meetings etc. Journalist's motives are more mixed. They say they want to get news and truth into their papers but this is only pretence. Papers want stories which will put burns on seats which will get coverage and referred to by their rivals. They want to get attention so each journalist must get into that cause. (SA1)

A newspaper which carries neither the news nor the opinions of the powerful (in political cases the politicians and their mouthpieces) would have very little power or influence. It would be considered unauthoritative, uninformed and sales would fall quickly. Politicians need the news media too – they need their backing to gain credibility and authority as this journalist interviewed described:

A Prime Minister is at his or her most powerful when they have all the media behind them – Thatcher was at her most powerful after the Falklands when she had the media's support. The newspapers were also behind her because she did as they wanted and took on the unions. She was at her most powerful then. What struck me at that time was how powerful she was. If a prime minister can harness the popular press in the UK they are very powerful...The media is all powerful because it can make or break a prime minister. It made Thatcher and it broke Major and Kinnock. (J3)

The groups are now considered to be so dependent upon each other that more than one politician quoted Enoch Powell, saying that:

For politicians to complain about journalists is like sailors complaining about the sea.
(P6)

It is easy to see why, as one Liberal Democrat MP has admitted, politicians "absolutely need the media" (Opik, 2004). They have no choice but to work through the media. Not because the media controls politics, but because it constitutes the space in which politics now chiefly happens for most people and to engage in the political debate they must do so through the media (Castells, 1997). This 'media-constructed public sphere' (Schulz, 1997) forces politicians to engage with the news media whether they wish to or not and this means they must find the easiest and most effective way they can to interact with journalists. This is usually through a political PR.

The dependence on these relationships for power within the political news industry indicates the circular nature of the media, showing there to be a huge amount of reliance between the groups. If

those feeding the media lose power, then the media itself becomes less influential and less able to attract people with power to talk to it and this becomes self-perpetuating. This notion can equally be applied to politics for once a politician is ignored by the media, their power to persuade diminishes and thus their power to gain access to the news media falls even further. One political PR commented that this is a never-ending circle.

The media is as powerful as politicians allow them to be. If you live by the media you die by the media....always someone else's power the media are responding to. It is an empty shell. Smoking gun but must be picked up and fired. (PR2)

The circular nature highlights how the two groups are not only dependent on each other but tied into an interlocking relationship from which neither seems able to escape. The idea and pursuit of the separation of powers and the defence of the fourth estate and separation of powers means that the two groups have their powers checked by each other yet they have also learnt to use each other to maximise their powers. There are various tools available with which both sides attempt to do this.

7.3 The elements of power

The famous maxim states: 'information is power'. Nowhere is it more true than in the political news industry. The crux of the relationship between political PRs and journalists focuses on the commodity of information. Information is traded between the two and the struggle for control of this information provides the daily battleground for the industry. "Information traders...in return for anonymity, handed out information and access on an exclusive basis" (Jones, 2003b). Information is the political PR's bargaining power.

We need spin doctors now. The broadcast journalist cannot exist without spin doctors and they know that. We need explanation and interpretation and newspapers need it too. Now we are back on trading information. (J3)

"News is an outcome of the bargaining interplay of newsmen and their sources" (Sigal, 1973: 5) and the bargaining over it has turned into a full on battle. This fight for information takes place over three arenas: (1) who controls the agenda, (2) who controls the content and (3) who controls access. The group which wins the majority of these battles can become dominant in the relationship and more powerful as the overall gatekeeper of that area of political news. Both groups, political PRs and journalists, take these battles extremely seriously.

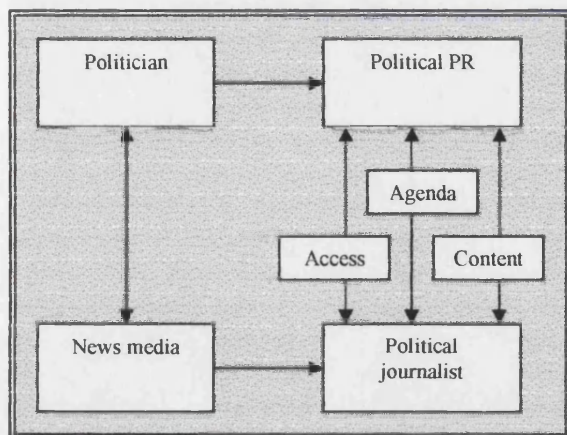


Chart 7b: Power elements in the political news industry, J. Perry.

7.3.1 Control of the agenda

Control of the news agenda¹ is the battleground on which all journalists and political PR wrestle. All interviewees had an opinion on who is in control of the news agenda but there was by no means a consensus. Many mentioned that on a day-to-day basis the *Today* programme sets the agenda as, despite the 24 hour media age, members of the Westminster Village wake up to it every morning, and its headlines dictate which stories are followed throughout the day. The legendary status of this programme self-certifies its importance as special advisors and politicians feel they cannot make a successful announcement unless they appear on it.

Control of the agenda does not refer to the individual stories covered on a daily basis, more a consideration of who controls the themes and ideas on a longer term, more strategic basis. It refers to the “transmission of salience, not the determination of opinions about an issue” (Norris et al, 1999: 69) and is a way of the news media enabling social problems to be acknowledged as public issues. Sir Christopher Meyer, John Major’s former press secretary has said that “every press secretary has a dream...to seize the agenda every morning – to dominate the agenda throughout the news cycle” (Cockerell, 2000). The ability to set this agenda is regarded as a highly competitive game between journalists, politicians, political PRs and the public (Bennett, 1996: 6).

Whilst Herman and Chomsky (2002) and Dunleavy and O’Leary (1987) would argue that the news agenda is set surreptitiously by elites through their dominance in society (see chapter two), on a more day-to-day basis, there was no overall agreement from my interviewees on who does control the news agenda.

¹ For more on agenda setting studies see Iyengar & Kinder (1987) and McCombs & Shaw (1977).

Politicians would like to think they do. Journalists would like to think they do. In reality it is somewhere in the middle. They set an agenda for themselves and not for the public. (PC3)

They also pointed out that political PRs can learn the ways of the media in order to predict their reactions to stories and influence a news agenda that way. Being able to predict the stance of a news organisation or an individual political journalist allows a political PR to swing stories or information round to a news agenda which suits them. This viewpoint was by no means universal though as many thought that despite the forward analysis by political PRs, it is actually journalists who were the agenda setters:

Not just in the form of inventing stories but selecting specific stories. (SA1)

An example used to illustrate this was with the NHS. One special advisor discussed how when, in one day, there may be three good health stories, one negative and one cure of cancer story, it will be the negative story that papers like *The Daily Mail* put on the front page. The cure of cancer story will go into the features section and the positive stories will be dropped. In this way he said:

The news pages hark back to the past and the features go to the future...They have their own agendas and do not care enough about the truth. They just care about justifying the story. (SA1)

My interviews took place at the time of the Hutton enquiry and coverage and discussions on the subject were playing strongly in the minds of those being interviewed. Many spoke of how the fight for control of the news agenda had gone too far:

It has cost a war and Dr Kelly's life. Is it worth it just to control the news agenda? (PO2)

A very important point to be made however is that often the agenda cannot, certainly initially, be set. Some events are just too big. September 11th, the death of Princess Diana, the 2003 Iraq war, the Boxing Day Tsunami are but four examples highlighting that, whilst individual journalists can take a personal stance on the issues involved, the news agenda will follow that specific story for days if not weeks or months. This was backed up by a special advisor:

Government is more a victim than it is in control. The power to control the news agenda is hugely exaggerated. (SA4)

Events also set the agenda. They can only control it when they have unity, when no-one will react badly. (J2)

So, whilst the government will be accused of chasing and setting an agenda, it often depends on events. They are unpredictable, as difficult to control as they are unexpected, often involve areas outside the beats normally covered by journalists and do not conform to specific timetables or government policies. Very often they will lead the news agenda.

7.3.2 Control of content

Control over the tone and content within the news agenda is a further element that both sides lust after equally, in order to establish their power. As discussed above, “unrealised information is a valuable commodity” (Rutter, 1997) and political PRs and journalists battle continuously over this commodity. Osborne and Walters talk about how Alistair Campbell viewed government information as a saleable commodity to be traded and doled out to damage opponents, support a political case, to reward co-operative journalists or to be withheld as a punishment. “He emphatically did not regard it as a neutral, value-free good to which any citizen could enjoy ready access” (Osborne & Walters, 2004: 154).

Content, as a commodity however, can be controlled by political PRs, by placing embargoes, restricting information in government and by selectively briefing. Although unauthorised leaks do occur and embargoes can be broken, political PRs are willing to punish this and journalists risk losing access and damaging opportunities for future exclusives if they do so. A former press officer spoke of how in his period in office (in the 1970s) political PRs had more power to control content.

Journalists accepted embargoes, did not break them and they did keep confidences provided you played the way they played. (PO1)

Journalists are now considered to be fighting back and mostly when they have content that is too good not to publish. Max Hastings calls it the ‘Private Eye ethic’ - when a “story is too good to check” (Hastings, 2003). To counter this, there have been calls for only fully attributable information to be given out. The down-side however would be a far more cautious approach to content release resulting in less information being given out overall.

It is a trade off. If journalists could print only information for which they had named sources there would be fewer lies in the media but there would also be fewer truths. (J6)

One final, but very significant, point surrounding the control of content focuses on the effects of changes in the news media. The increased competition and the pressurised and complex working environment in which journalists now function, means that it is necessary for journalists and news

organisations to rely upon 'information subsidies.' News organisations have been forced to make staffing cuts for budgetary reasons yet expand their services for competitive motives and so must rely heavily upon PR information subsidies (Davis, 2002: 1). "The astute politician will know that in a situation where media organisations have finite resources of time and money, where deadlines are tight and exclusives increasingly important, there is much to be gained by ensuring the journalists' ease of supply providing an information subsidy" (McNair, 1999: 70). Cutlip's research in the US, as long ago as the 1950s, suggested that half of what was read in newspapers came directly from press releases (see Hargreaves, 2003: 182) and since then news-gathering resources have diminished significantly, forcing journalists to rely upon external information subsidies.² The media are now so short staffed that they must rely upon PR handouts and are unable to investigate stories (Taylor, 2004).

The information also has to be produced faster and so spin doctors are in an ideal position to feed that appetite. (J6)

The political PR achieves an advantageous position and a positive shift in power when the information they have provided is conveyed directly in a news story without identifying the source. Journalists still decide what goes into an article but, with an ease of information flowing their way, the choice of information to go in, or the subject itself, can flow quicker and thus be beneficial to the PR. Journalists have been complicit in this process. "They publish what they get with little or no amendment or declaration of its source: there is a flourishing 'freebie culture' encouraging a black market of favours" (Moloney, 2000: 132). Many researchers³ say that the less resourced a media outlet is, the more dependent on information subsidies they become. As editorial resources have diminished, the public relations industry has expanded and journalists have become outnumbered and out-resourced by their PR counterparts. Alongside this, the lengths that political PRs go to learn about their "customers" means they can produce tailor-made products without rousing suspicion or applying pressure (Davis, 2002: 1-40).

The control of content is a continually shifting battlefield. Whilst ultimately it is the news organisation and journalist who decides what content shall be published, however the political PR is gaining an increasingly stronger foothold as a result of the increased reliance by the news media on information subsidies.

² For more on information subsidies see Sigal (1973), Hall et al (1978), Fishman (1980), Ericson et al (1989), Negrine (1994: 27&123), Miller (1994), Schlesinger and Tumber (1994), Philo (1995), Manning (1998), Davis (2000: 43-45) and Davis (2002).

³ Boorstein (1962), Sigal (1973), Gandy (1980) and Fishman (1980).

7.3.3 Control of access

The final area of contention between political PRs and journalists concerns the control of access. In order to do their jobs successfully, journalists need access to politicians and policy (the gate to which is controlled by the political PRs) and political PRs need access to the public and news media (the gate to which is theoretically guarded by the journalist). The more access a journalist has to politicians and content, the more successful they will be. The more access a political PR has to news space, the more successful they will be. Without this access they will both fail in their jobs. Interviewees from both sides recognised this.

The main thing is access. Now there are more controllers controlling access. (P1)

Journalists will do deals in return for access. They are complicit. They have understood and used that. (J3)

It is clear then that, whilst political journalists and PRs must battle over content, when it comes to access, the more friendly their relationships are, the more successful they will both be. Two elements then must be considered to understand the effect of the relationship on access, (1) the transient nature of the industry and (2) the similarities of those working in it.

The first effect on access concerns the transient nature of the political news industry. A point made repeatedly during my interviews was that the political news world is a highly insular, transient, circular industry. Of my own interviewees, nearly a third had worked in more than one area with six having been political PRs and journalists, one having been a politician and a journalist, one having been a politician and a political PR and one having worked in all three roles⁴. Davis quotes research to suggest that over half of communications staff have previously worked in journalism (Davis, 2002: 38) and political observers have talked about how press offices are often staffed with ex-journalists (Cockerell *et al*, 1984: 53). There are now also an increasing number of hybrid journalist-politicians who combine working in newspapers with an active involvement in politics" (Riddell, 1998: 16).⁵ Some were highly disparaging about why someone would switch roles, calling it treachery (J5) yet for many it would seem logical for a journalist to become a political PR for, not only do they already hold the key skill of understanding how the news media works, they will also find that political PRs work fewer hours, earn more, have better working conditions and are better resourced (CIPR annual survey, 1998).

The second reason for the predominance of relationship led access is that many of those in the political news industry come from similar backgrounds. Riddell has pointed out that often

⁴ See chapter four, Chart 4b.

⁵ For more on the circular industry see Moloney (2000: 127).

journalists share educational and social backgrounds with the politicians they cover and the two treat each other as equals (Riddell, 1998: 17). This follows through across the whole Westminster Village where there are many close relationships between members of separate groups who eat, drink and breathe the same political world. They socialise together, they send their children to the same schools and they work in a highly intense, specialist industry. "Politics is a very tiny place...if you know 100 people in the right places you can talk to the whole country" (Davis 2002: 681). Kevin Maguire⁶ estimates the political world to be made up of only 2000 people (Davis, 2002: 682) and these people have more in common with each other than anyone else (Osborne, 2004). Politicians, the news media, civil servants and political consultants make up the vast majority of people in the Westminster Village and they develop a shared culture which would not be understood by those outside their 'world'. Journalists and special advisors play regular games of football against each other (Jones, 1999: 185) and though there is an unwritten rule about journalists maintaining their distance from their contacts, in reality they are often very close (Greenslade, 2003).

It is important to have a good relationship. Both groups are in it together. Proximity makes it a lot easier but it is essential that you get along and this relationship makes them dependent that you do well. (PC1)

This can of course have significant implications as journalists "operating in elite political circles have, to a degree, become captured by those they report on" (Davis, 2002: 683). There are also concerns about the levels of "cooperation in various basic ways" (Alger, 1996: 190) so each group can find it much easier to gain access to what they need from the other, be it information or news media space.

These determinants of power: control of access, content and agenda are, whilst effective, regularly pushed aside by outside elements over which they have little jurisdiction. The main ones being events but also journalistic and governmental codes of conduct over behaviour or rules or news values which are set in stone by news organisations.⁷ Once these come into play, it is much harder for political PRs or journalists to maximise their power. Some of these factors need to be taken into consideration to understand the basis of how relationships between the two groups function. One of the significant factors concerns the principles of selection by the news media. This has wide effects which impinge to a great extent upon the relationships between political PRs and journalists.

⁶ Political editor at the Mirror.

⁷ For more on this see Sanders et al (1999: 483).

7.4 Foundations of relationship

There is an extensive body of research investigating how journalists choose the stories they do and what influences them. From this body it seems that three broad ideas have been developed: (1) that there is an organisational basis for the relationship, (2) that it is based upon news values and (3) that it is based upon elite dominance in society. Whilst many of the theories behind these ideas were discussed in chapter two it seems pertinent to reintroduce them here to show how they fit into the model of power within the political news industry.

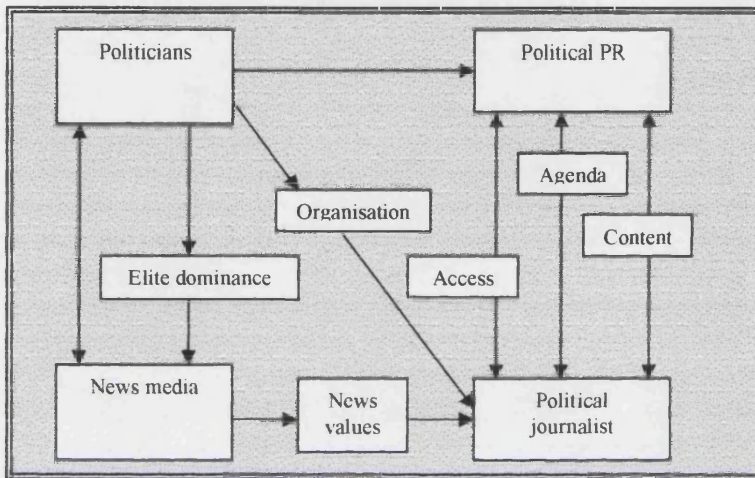


Chart 7c: Power and control elements in the political news industry, J. Perry.

7.4.1 Organisational basis for relationship

A prominent historical view within research on the relationships between journalists and their sources was based on the idea that it is the organisational bureaucracy and processes of the modern news room which effect the way interaction occurs. Sigal discusses how news organisations have all the principal attributes of bureaucracies (Sigal, 1973: 3) and Schlesinger describes many of them. He says “the news we receive on any given day is not as unpredictable as much journalistic methodology would have us believe. Rather the doings of the world are tamed to meet the needs of a production system in many respects bureaucratically organised” (Schlesinger, 1987: 47). The organisational notion is developed by Hall who discusses the way that “common sense constructs, such as ad hoc routines, are employed in most large scale organisations.” He says they “enable hard-pressed professionals to execute their tasks with the minimum of stress and role-conflict” (Hall, 1970: 148). This relates perfectly to a news room where the bureaucratic logic of news reporting means that it is much easier for a news organisation to rely on other bureaucracies to satisfy their input needs (Fishman, 1980: 143).⁸ It shows journalists as dependent

⁸ For further information on news organisations and bureaucracies see Schramm (1963), Epstein (1973), Gans (1980), Schudson 1989, Rock (1981) and Tuchman (1978).

on the activities of other institutions (Tiffin, 1989: 51) and often mirror their bureaucratic set up. Exploiting their bureaucratic set up provides a perfect opportunity for political PRs to control content and to feed information to journalists.

7.4.2 News value basis for relationship

Much research has been conducted to show that news is the product of a set of institutional definitions and meanings, which, in professional shorthand, are commonly referred to as news values (Hall, 1970: 149). Research into these news values⁹ begins to shed some light on the importance of political PRs to journalists. News values form the very basis of a journalist's job and ideally (for the news organisation) they would dictate every editorial decision. Every story must fill as many news values as possible in order to be covered at all and then to find its way up the running order or newspaper pages.

Political PRs are able to use news values (or at least their knowledge of news values) to their advantage. They are able to study the news values of the media to ensure the stories they provide fill as many of these areas of newsworthiness as possible. They must take into account numerous considerations surrounding the importance of the story, its format, its suitability for the medium, its quality, its novelty (Gans, 1980: 146-81) the presumed interest of the readership (Chalaby, 1998: 84), accessibility and fit (Golding & Elliott, 1979: 114). A consideration of much of the research on this subject (the main work coming from Galtung & Ruge, 1965, Allen, 1999: 62-3 and Golding & Elliott, 1979: 115-123) seems to highlight 11 main informal rules as most significant: conflict, relevance, timeliness, simplification, personalisation, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite persons, cultural specificity and negativity.

Political PRs have one further advantage involving news values. A major news value, shared by all news media organisations, is the importance of elites to their coverage. The fact that often political PRs represent 'elites' means that they have immediate appeal to journalists and as such have an instant relationship. Many elites are captured by the news net (Tuchman, 1978) giving political PRs an instant advantage in that their bosses are considered to be newsworthy in themselves, by virtue of being an elite and this guarantees them access to the news media.

7.4.3 Elite dominance basis for relationship

Beyond specific news values and constraints there is another issue considered to be significant in the relationship between political PRs and journalists which is affected by the way news stories

⁹ Breed (1955), Epstein (1973), Tuchman (1978), Golding & Elliott (1979), Gans (1980), Fishman (1980), Boyd-Barrett (1980), Galtung & Ruge (1981), Hetherington (1985: 1-21), Schlesinger (1987), Ericson et al (1987), Fiske (1992: 58-9), Dayan and Katz (1992), Chalaby (1998: 81-84) and Briggs & Cobley (2002).

are created. The idea, source domination, is that sources (elites in particular) automatically influence the perspectives from which news, and news gathering overall, is conducted (Negrine, 1994: 126). This means that even if a journalist is “not dominated by a source, they may still gradually absorb source values and perspectives until source and reporter become virtual allies” (Sigal, 1973: 144).

This idea follows the propaganda model put forward by Herman and Chomsky (see section 2.1.2.3) which says that filters¹⁰ occur in the sub-conscious which significantly limit the scope of what will even be considered news. Political PRs for the ruling classes (or ruling political party) have an instant boost in this situation as their viewpoints automatically pervade the political news agenda. “Access is structured and hierarchical to the extent that powerful groups and individuals have privileged and routine entry into the news itself” (Eldridge, 1995: 88). Dunleavy and O’Leary develop this idea into an ‘Elite Theory’ saying that politicians and businesses (with the money to hire PRs) can prevent a true competitive media and can stop minority and radical ideas going out. “The whispers of the poor are barely audible in the forums of liberal democracies” (Dunleavy & O’Leary, 1987: 159). Overall these filters and procedures “suffice to sustain the legitimacy of the economic-political system as a whole” (Gitlin, 1980: 276).

These three notions of how content, access and agenda are determined within the political news industry provide an insight into how power can be wrestled between each group. Whilst political PRs and journalists are democratically opposed and effectively rivals, they are also dependent on each other and are often friends, neighbours, former colleagues and all intelligent enough to learn what the other needs and react accordingly to their best advantage. This leads to relationships of a type unseen in any other industry. The way to analyse these is to examine the way they work together (and often against each other) on a daily basis.

7.5 Day-to-day relationships

Sourcing guidelines are often published within news media organisations and there are various levels of sourcing in use¹¹ yet they are rarely enforceable. As a result, the information given often depends entirely upon the relationship between the source and journalist – in our case the political PR and the political journalist. How this relationship is conducted on a day-to-day basis, as stories are being written and information is being disseminated, is of vital importance to understanding how, why and who the political news gatekeeper actually is. There are three elements surrounding the day-to-day relationship which I want to take further, to establish the way the relationship

¹⁰ Commercialism, advertising, over-reliance on government and corporate expert sources, disciplining of news organisation and the ideology of anti-communism.

¹¹ There are three main types of sourcing. There is an on-the-record comment which is fully attributable to the speaker. There is then an off-the-record comment, this is much hazier and depends on the relationship between the two speaking, hoping their information will be used but attributed to ‘sources’ and finally there is the background chat which is firmly intended not to be published.

actually works between the two groups: (1) the level of trust which exists, (2) the balance of power between the two sides and (3) the characteristics of the relationship.

7.5.1 Trust

A vital ingredient in the relationship between political journalists and PRs is trust. Unless each group is able to trust each other then the day-to-day relationships will become strained, difficult and tiresome. Journalists and political PRs must work with each other on a constant basis and the standard of one's work is reliant upon the standard of the work of the other.

Journalists, when asked if they trusted special advisors, said they did but they did so grudgingly.

You have to trust spin doctors, especially as an instant journalist. You just have to trust them. (J3)

On the other hand most political PRs guffawed in horror when asked if they trusted journalists. Very few trusted journalists in any way.

Never trust a journalist. They have a job to do. Their job is to get you and they will treat you hard when they find something. (SA2)

Do I trust political journalists? Would I lend money to them? No. Nor would I buy a second hand car from them. They have their own lines. You have to know how to play the game. (P3)

Others said they took it on a case-by-case basis – trusting some and not others (SA6) and another said that trusting journalists was a game (PO2). Further views saw the issue of trust as being based on a scale, with levels of trust being based upon many factors; the length of time the relationship has been developing, the organisation they work for, any personal relationships, the type of story, the seniority of the journalist or political PR or the geography of the story.

There is a scale of trust. Some I cannot even speak to but others up the scale there will be a straight forward trade off. Some stories all journalists would kill their granny to get a story. Most Mail journalists are right at the bottom but there are some journalists who are meticulous. Some, a handful of them, you can give background off the record briefings to but not most of them. Lots of trouble from some but many have been caught out by being too trusting or too manipulative. (SA1)

A lot of MPs have no contact with journalists on a national level but may well have good relations with the local press. It often depends on who they grow up with. If they are at school or university with people who go on to become journalists they will have better contacts. (P4)

Finally, those who do seem to be able to trust their opposite numbers are those who seem to have worked in both industries. A journalist who became a head of her party communications department said she would be:

Foolish to think that you can trust anybody 100%. I trusted some journalists more than party officials because I had been a journalist and know what it was like and know who would use and not abuse it. (PC3)

The idea of being able to trust each other lies upon the value of believing the other side is being honest. This viewpoint is backed up by Blair's Press Secretary, David Hill, who says that "you have to never lie – telling lies is disastrous. Because one of the most effective elements in being a spin doctor is that they believe what you are saying to them...Then you will have created a relationship with the journalists which is pivotal" (Hargreaves, 2003: 203). Crewe, Gosschalk and Bartle, in their analysis of why the Labour Party won the 1997 election listed ten campaigning principles and one was: "never compromise on trust. Trust is completely indivisible" (Crewe et al, 1998: 7). This was backed up by one journalist interviewed:

They may be selective with some information but, if something is a fact, then in my 30 years I cannot think of a situation where they have lied. (J6)

Despite this positive view, and the fact that not a single journalist interviewed actually said that they thought they had been lied to by a political PR, it was widely accepted that there was very little trust between the two groups.

Trust went out of the window. Government spokespeople must be careful of what they say and that breeds suspicion that they are hiding something and we had to manage relationships. Not surprisingly there are many tensions. (PO1)

A great distrust between journalists and the government and spin doctors has developed more than at anytime I can remember and that distrust comes from the very success of New Labour. There is a greater mistrust now than ever been in my lifetime. (J4)

It seems then that both sides believe (at least in theory) in honesty, but not in blind trust, and are too cautious to give that trust. It also seems that although I was expecting journalists to be less

trusting of political PRs it was actually the other way round, political PRs had far more concerns about trusting journalists.

7.5.2 Balance of power

Many theories on the relationship between journalists and political PRs have used canine terminology to describe the balance.¹² The terms watchdog (journalists overseeing political PRs), guard dog (journalists acting as a sentry for political elites), lap dogs (journalists being submissive towards politicians), attack dogs (journalists catching out politicians and their PRs) and guide dogs (each side conspiring together) have all been used to give views on the levels of equilibrium within their relationships. These terms, whilst fun, seem just too simplistic to accurately describe the realities of the balance of power in the early 21st century. It seems to now be far more complex than this. My view of this complexity is backed up by the fact that very few academics or commentators fall in line with one specific mode in its entirety and nearly all qualify their views with a caveat that no relationship is as simple as any of these modes prescribe.

The failure of the canine terminology to cover the complexities of the situation is not the only problem however. The second problem is that the canine terms are journalist focused. My research shows that the news sources (the political PRs) are now an integral part of the political news industry. Historically, it is seen that the journalist should be able to oversee politicians and that the balance of power should be strongly weighted in their favour. If, however, there is a chance of political PRs acting as a fifth estate, overseeing the journalists, they should be considered with equal focus. For this reason, I will discuss how the balance of power works jointly, affecting both sides.

A simplistic notion of the balance of power between political PRs and journalists is to determine that one side has power over the other and then to decide which side it is that is in control of the other. Though it is harder to establish the presence of this type of relationship in politics, it can sometimes be seen between political PRs and journalists, where one can determine that either is in the most powerful (either the watchdog or the lap dog) position.

The traditional view has always been that the journalists, at the very least, watch over the politicians (and thus their PRs) and, at the most, snipe at the PRs in an attempt to catch them out (Alger, 1996: 191). Many think this is the correct balance saying that “the working culture and arrangements between political PR and journalism should be arranged so that there is a distinctive balance of advantage in favour of the media” (Moloney, 2000: 109). Jeremy Paxman goes even further saying that “a broadcaster’s attitude towards politicians should display the same degree of

¹² Watchdog – Franklin (1994: 14-16), Brunson (2000: 284) and Curran (2001: 83). Guard dog – Donohue et al (1995) and Janowitz, (2000). Lap dog – Cockerell et al (1984: 40). Attack dog – Alger (1996: 190-1) and Perloff (1997: 60). Guide dog – Cook (1989: 30) and Kurtz (1998: 35).

respect which the dog reserves for the lamp-post” (Paxman, 1998: 1). The view repeated by many I spoke to was that, whilst there was once a deferential stance taken by journalists towards those in politics, this has now gone. These interviewees (but not the journalists themselves) believed that the journalists were, more often than not, the winners and power holders.

Some time has gone between the deferential age of ‘is there anything else you would like to tell the nation, sir’ and the new style of attack journalism. The death of deference has gone too far. (PC3)

Alongside these interviewees, Davis also says that many of the PRs he interviewed think this is the case and that it is journalists who tend to be in control (Davis, 2002: 31). Kisch says the influence and power of PR is neither as great nor as far-reaching as its inflated public reputation suggests (Kisch, 1964: 15). Bernard Ingham backs this up saying that he “tried to manage the news...but news management, in the sense of ensuring that nothing is allowed to get in the way of the story the government wants to get over, is impossible in the modern world...The real news managers today are the media themselves” (Ingham, 1991: 187-8). Even a politician (though also a former journalist), Austin Mitchell MP, has said that “we pretend to run the country but in fact the media have the real power...This shift in balance has gone so far that journalists are developing delusions of grandeur even of competence. We’re envious and jealous” (Mitchell 2004: 25). Even a journalist admits “the media have become too powerful” (Oborne, 2004).

The media can make or break a politician and they do. (J5)

Some however believe that the age of deference by journalists towards politicians (and their PRs) is not over however and that the political PRs can take control. Gans says that although the relationship is a tug of war (Gans, 1980: 117) with sources attempting to manage the news and journalists concurrently trying to manage their sources, “either sources or journalists can lead but more often than not, sources do the leading” (Gans, 1980: 116). Cockerell et al blame this on the journalists themselves saying that “the Lobby is often passive, it waits for the information to be presented on the sugared spoon held out by government public relations officers off the record. It practices spaniel journalism” (Cockerell et al, 1984: 40). Others go further classing journalists as lazy, in pursuit of an easy life, progressively relegating themselves to the status of mere instruments of government propaganda (Porter, 1985: 87). Some political PRs tended to agree:

One of the sad things is that journalists have been too ready to play along with what the parties have wanted. (PC1)

What I cannot forgive media for is slavish acceptance or favouritism and denial...This government I find it abdominal. Not intended but it is a poodle media. (PO1)

Many researchers have given the view that it is the politicians who hijack the media. Franklin says this is due to the considerable influence that politicians enjoy over the media (in funding, political patronage, regulatory body appointments, security interventions, censorship) and are able to drive the legislative process which enables them to restructure the wider environment in which broadcasters and journalists operate (Franklin, 1998: 8-12). This view was explained by one politician:

Number 10 remains extremely powerful. Frequently read newspaper articles which you know have come from a handout. (P6)

A further argument for why political PRs may have got the upper hand is down to the 24 hour news channels and the vast number of news hours which need to be filled. This gives the political PRs more power over what information and content they allow the journalists to have.

Spin doctors know electronic media want pictures so they do the photo-op for pictures but they make them agree not to ask any questions and only have cameras. The media let this take place and let it all be controlled because they are so desperate for news. (J3)

This desperation for news, and the influx of information subsidies to counter it (see section 7.3.2), shows that the more space a journalist has to fill, the more power the political PR has. When space becomes limited they face a much harder battle in their endeavour to influence.

7.5.3 Characterisation

Contrary to the claims above however, the overall sum of my research highlighted that no individual group was overtly superior, more powerful or influential over the other. Both political PRs and journalists operate in an ever changing political and media environment where they must work together, against each other, making the most of the power when they have it and defending themselves as best they can when they don't - often all within a very short period of time. The complex political news environment, in which they now work, has led to a complex scale and balance of relationships. The balance is reliant on many elements which can all have a significant effect on who can impact upon the other most significantly. Journalists and political PRs will regularly be locked into many of the above positions depending on the situation; whether it is a slow news day, the journalists' rank in the news room, the political viewpoint and news values of the news organisation, the personal situation of the individual journalist, the business interests of the news organisation's owner, the status of the political PR involved or simply – the events going on in the world that day.

7.5.3.1 Collusion

Despite being constant rivals, political PRs and journalists do have to work together on a daily basis and the better their personal relationships the easier their jobs can be. Whilst this does make their working lives better they tend to be seen as colluding against those they should be helping, i.e the public. They say that in the process of exchanging information for publicity (Tunstall, 1970) they conduct a complicit relationship (Oborne, 2004).

The political journalists thrive on this closeness and find it terribly exciting. If they are lucky enough to get into this inner sanctum then they find it hard to criticise the system they are part of...That underground secret stuff is very exciting and there is not much that beats it. Access to stuff all others cannot see – this is intoxicating. Politics is like a holiday romance which goes on too long. (PC3)

This relationship entails active collaboration (Cockerell et al, 1984: 9) which provides a “plausible explanation of how the relationship is sustained through the many tensions and vicissitudes to which it is prone” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1999: 472). That complicit activities were evident across the industry was a viewpoint reflected by interviewees of all groups:

Mutual back scratching, shared wartime experience, alcoholic, vicious, journalists working for government. (P4)

The reasons why this could happen are clear: the groups both have mutual obligations which depend upon each other and so to make both their lives easier they agree that “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1980). Put frankly, it makes the machinery of news management run smoother and everyone’s work life easier. A further reason is that this circular, transient world means they all spend a large amount of time together in the Westminster Village. Time and time again when I asked political PRs what their relationship was like with the media they replied with “a lot of my friends are political journalists.” This was similarly repeated when I spoke to journalists. The situation works well for political PRs as it makes their role of getting stories into the news media and of controlling access much easier. For this reason it seems that they push for collusion as much as possible.

Journalists will do deals in return for access. They are complicit. (J3)

The only way to influence journalists is to spend as much time as possible with journalists. And by knowing what the story is for the next day. You are failing in your job if you do not spot it early. Trying to kill stuff is a million times harder... Journalists are like lions if you do not feed them they feed up on you. So it is good to fill them up on a

constant feed of stories. If you do not provide stories then they make them up. Speak to all of them daily. (SA2)

Basically, as a spin doctor, you have a spectrum of journalists which you work with. Some will be very close and you will tell them almost everything and use them to plant stories. (PC1)

Apart from the democratic deficiencies which occur when this collusion takes place, there are also problems for how the media then relate to the public. "People feel they are spectators or eavesdroppers on what is a private conversation" (Jowell, 2004).

There are complicit arrangements with media - they are talking to each other not the public...Political journalists and politicians are so far out of touch with what the public think. (PC3)

Many commentators are concerned about this complicity as it not only goes against the democratic function of the news media but also against the public. "We have got too close to each other and we should get to know each other a lot worse" (Osborne, 2004). One way to get around this is to insist on more openness. There are problems with this too as Riddell points out. "To insist that all contact between journalists and politicians should be public and attributable is daft and unworkable" (Riddell, 1998: 2). Yet with this collusion many potential problems arise between political PRs and journalists.

7.5.3.2 Conflictual

Those who fear excessive collusion are countered by those who see a conflictual element to the political news industry. The image of political PRs and journalists as bloodhounds, snarling and fighting each other at every opportunity summarises the adversarial nature that many interviewees and researchers have put forward.

Blumler and Gurevitch describe the relationship as adversarial saying it describes how journalists should regard leading politicians and government figures. They say the relationship should pivot on an assumed conflict of interest between themselves and politicians (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1999: 470). They point out that that, in a representative liberal democracy, there is a pre-supposition that there is a fallibility of the wielders of power and so an adversarial relationship between those holding the power and the press is essential to hold them to account. They mean this with regards to the news media taking a watchdog or attack dog role but what happens when the political PRs fight back? What happens when they try to take a watchdog role over the media

(such as the bullying and harassment discussed in chapter six)? This can create a full scale war between themselves and the journalists and these clashes were highlighted by many interviewees.

Always been characterised by suspicion and mutual distrust. (SA1)

Franklin said you should never have a quarrel with men who buy ink in barrels. I agree with this but am not good at sticking to it. I don't live up to it! They are there to manipulate us and we are there to manipulate them. (P2)

Alistair Campbell has said he "got into a situation where combat was the only language being spoken, which is not terribly sensible" (Campbell, 2000b). Another former Prime Minister's Press Officer agrees saying that the government and the media live in a "permanent and natural state of tension" and that the relationship is "essentially cannibalistic." He says they feed off each other but no-one knows who is next on the menu (Ingham, 1998: 12). A journalist reflected on this:

The relationship is one of mutual suspicion and mistrust and it is greater now than I can ever remember before because journalists feel like they have been taken for a ride and feel guilty they have allowed this to happen. (J4)

Some see a relationship of this kind as a good thing. "Relations between the government and the press are bad, getting worse and should under no circumstances be allowed to improve" (Jacobson, 1998: 1). Michael Brunson, the former ITN Political Editor, says that it is essential for journalists to have a "better than arms length relationship with any government spin doctors" (Brunson, 2000: 284) and the Conservative's Chief Press Officer says: "I don't think the relationship should ever be good. If it is, you are not doing your job properly, or you have the bizarrely cosy relationship...there is no scrutiny" (Black, 2003).

Other commentators see the negativity and aggression between the two sides as more concerning and think they are "trapped in a downward spiral of passive-aggressive behaviour...and something has to be done to untie the knot before Westminster politics and press become terminally polluted by mutual cynicism and disrespect" (Rushbridger, 2000: 6-15). The adversarial model however is criticised for being extremely narrow and for not understanding the way that political PRs and journalists need each other in order to work effectively. It provides "no mechanism for understanding the enormous amount of cooperation and even collaboration that takes place" (Grossman & Rourke, 1976).

7.5.3.3 *Collusive conflict*

A more rational approach accepts that in the main, the groups work in collusive conflict. The notion sees political PRs and journalists in a love-hate relationship where they are in a constant battle with each other but where peace breaks out when they need each other to succeed (Barnett and Gaber, 2001: 32). No group is dominant for a significant amount of time and the balance of power is constantly shifting. The fourth estate responsibility of the news media is not redundant and they are not submissive, yet they are neither in complete control of the agenda or the content. Cook frames this in terms of journalists and politicians 'sleeping together' but accepts that there is a shifting balance of power so no-one ends up being consistently dominant (Cook, 1989: 30).

Tiffin relates the situation to a family. He says that successful political leaders relate to the media in the same way that parents control an excitable two-year old. They know that children get grumpy if not fed regularly, and that they are keener on sweets than savouries. They know their attention span is short and the constant appearance of novelty is necessary to maintain interest. They know confrontations can be noisy, but are usually brief, are best solved by diversion rather than persuasion and that memories are short and forgiving and they know that the best means of control is to make it look as if the child is getting its own way (Tiffin, 1989: 94).¹³ Cockerell continues the theme comparing the relationship to that between husband and wife.¹⁴ Many interviewees also put forward this view:

It is a parasitical relationship. The two sides feed off each other. Politicians want to get messages across and the journalists want to write news and sell newspapers and political news has always been a staple because political news tells you about people running your country even if people are not interested in politics as such. There has always been a battle, especially when spin doctors are so aware of the journalists need for a narrative and this is always an issue. (J4)

These controls match the game playing idea as "the press are playing the game of the politicians" (Osborne, 2004). Many of my interviewees followed this idea:

Sometimes journalists' and politicians' motives coincide when we have a good story but it is rare...We (press and spin doctors) play games with each other. We put out stuff we know is bollocks and they write stuff they know is bollocks. (SA1)

¹³ For more see Swanson (1999).

¹⁴ The husband (government) is described as older and heavier, serious-minded, pompous, humourless, slow of speech and wanting only a quiet life. The wife (news media) is considered livelier, shrewder, more perceptive, wise to the ways of the world and addicted to gossip. The couple bicker and drive each other to distraction but they cannot live without each other (Cockerell et al, 1984: 40).

There is a tendency to hype and accelerate and they live by shocking and to exaggerate but that is just part of the game... That is the basis of the love-hate relationship but we need them to reach the ear of people and the fact they are less obliging just indicates their game is more competitive. (P1)

The important point here is that each group requires the other, however reluctantly, to achieve its own interests and purposes. The mutual reliance of each group means they need to continually adjust their relationships despite continuous conflict and pockets of co-operation. Within this, each side is able and free to deploy whatever power resources it can command so it can strengthen its hand (Grossman & Rourke, 1976). "Politicians and journalists are certainly adversaries but, on occasion, they are just as certainly accomplices in the enterprise of political communication" (Franklin 1998: 16). Co-operation is required in the political news industry but this viewpoint says it should always be leavened by a healthy dose of tension.

Sometimes journalists come out on top, sometimes political PRs do. There is no one overarching gatekeeper and no upper hand on offer. It is a constant battlefield on which political PRs and journalists fight every day. When there is a truce and collusion appears, it provides simplicity and calm for all, yet when more information appears, the battle recommences.

7.6 The Hutton Enquiry: The low point of the relationship?

As seen in the beginning of the introduction to this thesis (and in chapter 5, section 5.4), a short two-way radio interview between Andrew Gilligan and John Humphreys in May 2003 set in trail many hours of radio and television news coverage, barrels of news print in the print press, a suicide, numerous committee hearings all culminating in an Enquiry, run by Lord Hutton, "to urgently to conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr Kelly" (Hutton enquiry terms of reference, 2003). Lord Hutton began hearing the evidence of witnesses on the 11 August 2003. He adjourned on 4 September to consider which witnesses he wanted to recall for cross-examination, as well as any new witnesses he wanted to call. He began the second phase of his Inquiry on 15 September, before adjourning on 25 September 2003 to write his Report. His report was published on Wednesday 28 January 2004 and the overall enquiry cost £1.68 million

The news agenda was set by one fact (which ultimately the enquiry stated was incorrect) but, despite it being broadcast very early in the morning when few members of the public would hear it is was still able to set the news agenda. This maybe because it was on an agenda setting programme but also because the trend within the modern news media is to make a story out of a story. The complaints about the story to the BBC from Ten Downing Street made the story much bigger and thus legitimised coverage for other news media organisations.

Whilst the enquiry had very thin terms of reference (purely to look at the suicide of Dr David Kelly), the media coverage surrounding the enquiry was able to pick out numerous issues about the relationship between the political PRs and journalists which had led to the antagonistic situation which occurred. Political PRs had complained vociferously about the claims Andrew Gilligan had made and a much bigger issue of conflictual feelings were shown to exist between the BBC and the government. These feelings had been brewing for a long time and it seems this '45 minute claim' was the catalyst to exposing them.

The story, rising to the levels of coverage that it did, gave none of the players involved any favours. It could hardly be said to have restored levels of confidence to the public and perhaps may just have alienated them even further. All it did was highlight BBC (supposedly the gold standard in journalism) airing stories with only one source, and make government look petty and untrustworthy.

This enquiry does provide an example of a conflictual relationship, highly conflictual in fact. However, if political journalists and PRs were to work with each other like this on a continual basis there would never be exclusives, politicians would never be interviewed and all those working in this industry would be constantly exhausted working in such a negative environment.

7.7 Conclusion

The notion of power in the interaction between political journalists and PRs comes from two sources. Their bosses (who take on democratic obligations in return for power) and the fact that their rivals are dependent upon them in order to conduct their jobs successfully. Political PRs need journalists to convey their information to the public and journalists need political PRs to provide information with which to fill their pages and running orders. This dependency over the commodity of information now focuses on three battlefields on which political PRs and journalists fight in an attempt to assert their dominance over the other; control of the agenda, control of content and control of access. Confrontations over these controls occur daily and provide the crux of the focus on which side is seen to be most powerful and 'in charge.'

The basis of the relationship has three main pillars on which it is said that the power is flowing. Some say that there is an organisational basis for the relationship where the news gathering activities are focused on the structures within political organisations and that stories are actually well matched (usually on a beat routine) to a bureaucratically organised production system. The fact that this system mirrors the organisations for which they work makes life much easier for political PRs. The second pillar is the notion that all news decisions are based upon a set of pre-established news values. These values, learnt by journalists in each organisation, can also be learnt

by political PRs to enable them to 'tailor' information in the way that it will be seen as most attractive to each journalist. The final pillar follows the idea that there is elite dominance in society which filters down to the media. Political PRs will often be working for those elites and thus find controlling the news agenda fairly easy.

A further aim of this chapter involved investigating the changes in the news media since the time of Tunstall's research in 1970 to see how the current relationship between political PRs and journalists functions. The changes have greatly affected the balance of power and this has significantly increased the abilities of political PRs to influence journalists. Increased competition in the light of more channels and 24 hour news means that there is a greater reliance for journalists on the 'information subsidies' which political PRs can provide. These subsidies provide political PRs with more opportunities to express stronger control over content and can allow them a greater degree of control over which political journalists get access to political sources. This is slightly countered however by the fact that journalists now have many more political PRs to go to (see chapter six) and so can cultivate sources in more areas and deny access to those who are unco-operative. These views however must be tapered against one important element – do the two groups trust each other? My research found that whilst journalists felt they had no choice but to trust political PRs, political PRs were highly unlikely to trust journalists. If they ever do trust them it is on a scale relating to personal factors such as old friendships, the geography of a story or the fact that they themselves used to be a journalist.

The final aim in this chapter was to analyse and appraise who wields the balance of power in the relationship. The results of my research point to the idea that no one group was superior, more powerful or influential over the other but that both groups operate in an ever changing political and media environment where they must work together, and against each other, attacking by using their power when they have it and defending themselves as best they can when they don't. The complex news media environment in which they work has led to a myriad of relationships developing which can best be classed (as Gaber stated in 2002) as collusive conflict. Whilst this situation means that a version of the separation of powers is working, with neither player in full control of the other and both watching over each other, it does risk alienating the group they are designed to represent and report to: the public. As the low point of the Hutton Enquiry highlights, political journalists and PRs play a match with each other in order to execute their own needs the needs of the public seem to be forgotten. The implications of this relationship and its effect on the democratic nature of the news media will be considered and reflected upon in the next chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT – IMPLICATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

8.1 Introduction

Understanding and detailing the nature of the changes in the news media and political public relations industry has led towards a conclusion that the nature of the relationship between political PRs and journalists is one that is both collusive and conflictual. This indicates that the political PR takes a much stronger part in the gatekeeping process than they have previously done. As a result, it seems essential to discover how this collusive conflictual relationship, affects the ability of the news media to be effective in a liberal representative democratic society.

Research question: How does the current relationship between political journalists and political PRs affect the ability of the news media to be a fourth estate?

Aim: To engage debate upon the expectations of journalists within the news media.

Aim: To assess whether the relationship between political journalists and PRs prevents journalists from carrying out their fourth estate role successfully.

Having established that there is a collusive conflictual relationship between political journalists and PRs, it must now be examined whether it is an aid or a hindrance to journalists in carrying out the aspirations of the news media under the auspices of a representative liberal democracy. There are two areas which must be considered here: the expectations ascribed to the news media in their position as the fourth estate and the specific functions that a journalist should undertake if they are to successfully fulfil these expectations. The public, in their role as both citizens and consumers could be seen to have (as discussed in chapter two) four specific expectations of the political news media. The first is to provide a free flow of accurate and diverse information. The next is to provide information in a form that can facilitate and motivate the public to question pre-existing beliefs. The third is to be a civic forum which encourages debate, a stronger sense of belonging and participation in the political process. Finally, the news media are expected to act as a check and balance (or a watchdog) on the government. Each of these elements; accurate news, questioning information, providing a civic forum and establishing a check and balance needs to be considered against the attributes of the collusive conflictual relationship to establish how the relationship affects the news media's role in democratic life in the UK and, within that, the journalists ability to be a strong gatekeeper.

8.2 The effect of the collusive conflictual relationship on the news media's ability to be a fourth estate

The ability of journalists to fulfil the expectations of a fourth estate news media has many variables and many of the characteristics unearthed in chapters five, six and seven can affect this. Taking each expectation individually should allow a consideration of how these elements have impacted upon the news media when journalists are engaged in a collusive conflictual relationship with the representatives of the politicians they are tasked with overseeing.

8.2.1 Providing a free flow of accurate and diverse information

For the news media to allow a liberal representative democracy to work effectively they need to be providing highly accurate information. As the former Home Secretary has said: "accuracy is very important and accuracy in information in a democracy is very important...We should be scrutinized but it should always be with accuracy" (Clarke, 2003). There is a high expectation towards accuracy yet there is also an expectance that it is undermined by exaggeration and gossip, both of which are rife in the modern news media. The BBC's director of policy and legal affairs has admitted that "truth and accuracy are the gold standard ... but you don't always achieve it" (Thomson, 2003) and this was reflected by a journalist interviewed:

Media has got a lot worse and there is much more dishonesty and distortion and this is bad for democracy. Democracy requires the flow of information you can trust. It is not so much that people are bamboozled by information but that people see through it. They know lots of information is dodgy so they end up not trusting anything they read. (J6)

The issue of trust talked about here also has a significant impact. If the relationship gets too conflictual, with journalists and political PRs refusing to trust each other at all then this will have a major effect on whether the public can trust either group in the political news industry.

Both media and politicians do not trust each other enough to do it today. A lot has been lost. News has turned into spin and this is disingenuous. (PO2)

If those inside the political news industry do not trust each other to be accurate, how are the public to trust any of them? Barnett has conducted research which suggests that the adversarial relationship between government and the news media has resulted in all political information being mistrusted (Phillis, 2003). Low levels of trust have been picked up in opinion polls and surveys (as shown in chapter five - section 5.3.3) and if the public trust neither politicians nor political journalists then how are they to know who is providing them with the accurate information to enable them to choose between political parties in an election or to hold their

government to account on a more regular basis? With neither trust nor accurate information there can still be a democracy but it is neither a truly representative, nor an effective one.

A major problem is that, as the news media's ability to be seen as trustworthy or accurate falls, the greater the possibility of public disengagement with politics. The closer the political journalist and PR move towards each other in a collusive manner, the wider the potential gap for disengagement gets.

My feeling is you do not know what you have got until you lose it...Our biggest challenge is apathy and disenchantment with the political process but this is not a given. If we can see a really big difference between political parties you will then get a huge turnout. The media should want a role in that but it is up to the media to decide if they want a role. Media have a huge power but there is a responsibility which goes with that and it is significant and media need to take the responsibility they have. (P5)

Disengagement is highly dangerous to the ideal of a representative democracy. "The ideal of the informed citizen has always been regarded as central to the functioning of democracies" (Gurevitch et al, 1996: 195). If the citizen is no longer effectively informed, either through their own disengagement or due to a lack of accurate information, democracy will exist only in name, not in practice. Whilst the consideration of disengagement falls outside of the remit for this thesis, there is a strong case to be made for a study of its impact in relation to political news media coverage and those working in the industry. The problems of disengagement are being considered by those working in politics (in particular by those within the Think Tanks; The Hansard Society and Demos) and politicians make regular noises regarding ways to increase engagement but as we saw in chapter five (section 5.3.3) a negative image of the news media is only managing to exacerbate the problem. The negative image of both groups in the political news industry decreases the public's trust in them. The lack of trust creates a negative image.

People do not believe now. There is a cynical media and the public are cynical too. This has damaged the industry. (PC4)

A way needs to be found for this circle to be broken in order to increase trust and increase engagement in the democratic process. Ensuring the public are supplied with accurate information seems to be a good start. Accurate information is not the only expectation here though. It is also essential, in a democracy, for the information to be given in a simple, easy to understand format so that all members of the public are able to understand it.

Information provision is a contentious matter as there are many levels of information. It "is not simply a set of objective facts to be packaged and delivered around the nation: informing is a

deeply political process. To inform is simultaneously to circulate knowledge and to give form to something” (Fiske, 2003: 49). Some, like Fiske, say the role of the journalist with regards to the concept of information is to circulate and give form to knowledge by passing on exactly what they know themselves.

Most journalists are just doing their job which is to make available to all what is available to a few. (P4)

Others say the news media’s role is to simplify and organize information in order to make it understandable and digestible to the public.

No-one has time to read things like government white papers – they just want to read the headlines. An elite group of people read things like white papers but no-one else would. With the explosion of the media, in size and 24 hour broadcasting, we have more access to information but less access to background. (PC3)

All journalists should be more dedicated to background stories but instead they go for what is easier to write. The debate bell division is a disservice to democracy. (PC4)

It is this background information (which both of these interviewees wanted to see) which makes news understandable and provides the context to the stories published. Without this context, which decreases further as journalists have less time to work on each story, information in a pure comprehensible format becomes rarer and rarer. None of my interviewees indicated that they saw information as easy to understand and comprehend.

8.2.2 Providing information to facilitate citizens questioning pre-existing beliefs

The expectation of providing information in a form that can facilitate and motivate the public to question pre-existing beliefs revolves around the pluralism prevalent in the information given. A representative liberal democracy relies upon the news media to provide a public space in which information is shared and the public informed. Free competition for media space and political power should mean that a variety of voices are heard in the media (Miller, 2002: 71).¹ Under a fully functioning fourth estate news media, a plurality of voices can be heard because journalists have the upper hand, can assert their independence from influence, and are thus able to seek information from a wide variety of sources. This allows them to consider an extensive range of views when investigating stories and put forward a full and valid set.

¹ For more see Gans (1980), Sigal (1986) and Blumler & Gurevitch (1995).

Tabloidisation has had a particularly negative effect on the news media's ability to present a wide range of views. The first reason for this is because it increases the herd instinct of political journalists. The increased tabloidisation of the news media, increasing the need for journalists to find guaranteed reliable information (Hargreaves, 2003: 12) means that journalists become scared to be different, follow similar stories and similar 'lines within stories.' A politician said that:

Adam Boulton from Sky once told me that if he came back from a presser and went on air with information he would get asked by his bosses why it was different from the line PA were putting out. The Parliamentary sketch writers are just as bad and will get together in a group and decide what the story is. And when journalists come away from a Downing Street presser they will get together to decide what they heard! (P2)

These types of actions mean that only a limited number of viewpoints are ever released. The more this happens, the less plurality there is in the news media. As competition increases so does the presence of tabloid values in the news media and the situation continually worsens.

A further outcome of the increase in tabloidisation is that the news media now give decisions rather than details, something which is stunting an effective civic forum and means that the news media no longer routinely host debates or provide a plurality of voices. Debates on any non-confrontational or multi-dimensional issue are either not covered sufficiently or, if they are, are covered as a *fait accompli*. One special advisor interviewed spoke about this and gave an example of the 2012 Olympic bid. He said that before it was agreed the bid would go in, he was trying to find out if members of the public actually wanted London to bid. He thought this would be possible through the media but found that sports journalists only wanted to write stories putting London's bid to host the Olympics in a positive light. He said he found it very difficult to get a decent debate going within the media over whether hosting the Olympics would be a good idea or not and when he did offer to give journalists both sides of the story he feared it would be spun as a split. This, he said, meant that policy could not be discussed. (SA1) A journalist accepted this was a problem saying that the:

View they have is they cannot rehearse arguments till the decision is made or the media will make it look like there are splits in cabinet. If reporting was different and there was real debate going on about transport etc and the media did not hype it up and make it so adversarial then politicians may be able to have more debates in public. (J4)

These implications of tabloidisation are similar to the implications of the collusive conflictual relationship, providing a situation where processes rather than policies are discussed. This means that if there is any debate in the news media it focuses on how a policy has been portrayed, or

spun, not whether it is the correct policy in the first place. Pure information and a plurality of viewpoints are pushed out and only insider content is developed.

They love to talk about the processes of politics rather than the policies or issues... The policy was lost behind the process. Journalists are obsessed with process. (PC5)

The media however have now got too obsessed with the process rather than the substance... Makes politics more remote as it becomes more mediated. (PC1)

This issue of process over policy has been labelled meta-coverage, described as a “postmodern fascination with surfaces and the machinery that cranks them out” (Gitlin, 1991: 122-125). This fascination involves extensive post Parliamentary debate rituals, election campaign consultants talking on camera about an event or statement that has just occurred (or sometimes is still to occur) and reporters interviewing other reporters to discuss how the campaign or story is going. This activity of making stories out of stories (for more see 5.3.1.1) means the processes of the coverage becomes the story – not the news that was originally being portrayed. Whilst this can increase the excitement around a news story it detracts from the original story by making one of the news angles the coverage. As we have seen, with tabloidisation decreasing the number of angles discussed with regards to each story (often to make it simply two sided and to remove any grey areas which will be time consuming (or wordy) to explain) the angle on the coverage of each news item as well as trying to explain the item itself means that the actual angles given on the news item will decrease even further. This diminishes the public’s opportunity to gain a plurality of views or learn information which may help them to question pre-existing views.

This lack of debate and the resulting increase in meta-coverage can have concerning implications for democracy.

We need to get back to a more honest form of communication. In every debate the heart needs to be conveyed and then debated and if people have not got a good facility to have open debate about issue then democracy is in danger and how can you create the fabric of society beneath spinning and issues which need to be debated and we did not have a forum for this to happen as everything is tempered by the spin. Thatcher allowed debate. Blair controls the news agenda so much no debate is allowed. After Thatcher the honesty has gone. (PO2)

The concerns surrounding the lack of debate and, related to this, the lack of viewpoints put forward by the media, do not effect the amount of time available in the media for news and this is one positive aspect of the news media changes. Due to the massive increase in the number of publications and dissemination channels there are many more broadcasting hours and news space

available to news. This provides more information in general and a wider range of topics up for discussion to open up.

There is much more now in the public domain now than 20 years ago...The culture of secrecy has changed quite significantly. Used not to be allowed to mention MI5 or MI6 and for Prime Ministers Questions there were huge lists of subjects which could not be mentioned. There was Masonic secrecy. There was a whole range of things which have now become public. (J4)

This small bonus, whilst going some way, does not make up for that fact that the tabloidisation of the news media and the increase in competition have diminished the amount of influence-free debate and the range of viewpoints presented for examination by the public.

8.2.3 Hosting a civic forum encouraging debate, a stronger sense of belonging and encouraging participation in the political process

The news media “play a fundamental role in relaying information which citizens require in order to make informed judgements about their political leaders and participate effectively in the proper functioning of a democratic state” (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 1). To act as a civic forum the news media must facilitate the provision of a space for information and news to be discussed and debated and a range of views and opinions to be published in order to inform those debates. They should provide a bulletin board or public sphere (Habermas, 1979) for information, ideas and feedback to be placed on which can potentially become an agent to mobilise the public to participate and have their voices heard. This should provide the news media with an ability to force governments to take account of what people think (Curran and Seaton, 2003: 277).

Changes in the news media and the growth of a collusive conflictual relationship have affected the news media’s ability to be a public sphere. They have done this by diminishing parliament’s role in the media whilst increasing the media’s role in politics. This has led to debates taking place on College Green and in news studios rather than across the floor of the Commons and, with the development of 24 hour news, reporters and the public are “much more likely to hear a politician saying something newsworthy in an interview on Sky or News 24 than in the chamber” (Sparrow, 2003). Hargreaves describes this process eloquently by saying that “in 1928 Macaulay dubbed the press gallery in Parliament a ‘fourth estate’ of the realm. Today the news media appear to many to have become the first estate, able to topple monarchs and turn Parliament into a talking shop which ceases to exist if journalists turn their backs” (Hargreaves, 2003: 4).

McChesney follows this viewpoint stating that a fourth estate does not exist when freedom in the news media is restricted to a few privileged elite. The set up and nous needed to get involved in

any type of public sphere, “accords special privileges to some citizens who can then dominate public debate” (McChesney, 1997: 269). When political events are taken away from parliament and the public are reduced to an audience on the sidelines the impression is given that unelected journalists are taking over from elected representatives. Many have suggested that, as the studio which houses the Today programme continues to replace the House of Commons as the place where ministers are held to account, the democratic process has become less accountable and a politician I interviewed agreed.

We have disarmed the role of parliament and unleashed events which spiral out of control. If use media rather than parliament then you take away parliament’s role as scrutiniser...What is happening now is the attempt of parliament to move focus out of the TV studios and back to parliament. Not John Humphreys but MPs are questioning. (P5)

There is also however a positive element to this increased media role as it allows civic conversations to override privileged parliamentary ones. Some have said that this is essential because if those in Parliament are not doing their job properly and watching over each other then the media can step in and do it for them (Ashley, 2004). One politician interviewed backed this up strongly:

If you want exposure you go through the media. Parliament is for ventilating issues, the press is the power and it is the intermediary. Whether it is right or wrong, it is better going through the media than going through Parliament. (P1)

A further issue however is that when political PRs and journalists collude too extensively they become inward looking, forget the news media’s role as a civic forum and they stop listening to feedback from the public. Life in the Westminster Village can be very insular and if the public only get their say every five years in elections then they will be watching Westminster through their television sets, but as spectators, not getting involved. In this case, there becomes a “battle between the media and the politicians that actually forgets the people” (Morris, 2004). Interviewees I spoke to were in strong agreement with this analysis:

Political journalists and politicians are so far out of touch with what the public think...For too long they have just been talking to each other, everyone’s to blame...There are complicit arrangements with media, they are talking to each other not the public...All about flattery and ego massaging and in this atmosphere there is not much room for people to go in and see it as it is. (PC3)

As a mobilising agent the news media should be encouraging participation in the political process yet, as described above, much of the time they actually prevent the public wanting to get involved.

It is not just this collusive conflict which is preventing participation though. The aggression which seems to be present in the news media in this relationship can seem very intimidating and quite off-putting to those members of the public who would like to be involved in media debate. One commentator has said that “evidence is growing that the increasingly hostile tenor of political journalism in the twenty-first century may be helping to undermine faith in the democratic system itself” (Barnet, 2004: 301). This ‘hostile tenor’ is incredibly damaging to democracy as the more the public back away from using the news media as a civic forum, the less public opinion will be on display to politicians and the government.

Media should not be nasty. They should be questioning. Media must realise it is part of society and they should not ruin society. (PO1)

Changes in the news media, in particular the increased competition leading to tabloidisation, have effected this element of the news media by diminishing Parliament’s role as measured against the media role, opening up the idea of a more public forum. Changes in the relationship between political PRs and journalists, resulting in a collusive conflict between the two have also affected this element of the news media, by showing the players in the political news industry to be talking only to other political elites and potentially ignoring the public at large.

8.2.4 Act as a check and balance against any abuses of power

The final issue is that of the news media being expected to act as a check and balance (or a watchdog) on the government. The journalist in a watchdog function oversees government officials and the elected legislature to ensure they do not abuse their powers. If abuses are found then the journalist can whistle blow by publishing their findings, the idea being that the threat of being exposed keeps potentially corrupt officials in line. In reality however, there is often collusion between political PRs and journalists which greatly reduces the severity of this threat. Political PRs and journalists are in a love-hate relationship, fighting a constant battle where there is an occasional outbreak of peace (see chapter seven for more on this). Neither group is dominant for long and the balance of power is constantly shifting.

The ideals behind the watchdog media do not change. The journalist is still, as much as ever, trying to catch out government members or officials. These aims are aided by the fact that the age of deference towards senior politicians has passed. They now have the opportunity to be more vigorous in their investigations and questioning and the adversarial nature of their role has only increased, not decreased. The difference now is that government officials (and their PRs) have become adversarial too. They have become less likely to let unsatisfactory matters lie and they will not sit back and let journalists walk all over them. They now fight back. The Hutton enquiry was an example of this. After many months of journalists in news organisations continually

attacking the government for their stance on Iraq, the government finally snapped and put their fists up. The carnage which followed was bloody. One man died and many careers were stunted but, in private, it seems the Labour Government see themselves as having 'won the media battle' and it must be said the BBC has been far less antagonistic on the matter since Hutton's report was published.²

As political PRs have got more assertive and fought back they have made it much harder for journalists to get any information they do not want them to have. One major way of doing this has been to centralise all communications³, making the gate through which information flows much thinner, giving political PRs more control.

Blair went back to putting all departments into one overall plan so the media had very little leeway in getting stories and getting anything out of the departments and this damaged the democratic process, something which was already being damaged by the way Number 10 was sidestepping Parliament, and pitched the government and the media against each other. (PO2)

The fact that political PRs can now fight back can have a serious impact upon democracy. When the battles over control make it too difficult for the journalist to undertake their role effectively, they are prevented from carrying out the news media's function as a fourth estate.

Contrastingly, at times, the two groups get on and so well so that they could be said to collude with each other. Whilst this is difficult to reconcile with the image of the two groups in a constant battle it does make sense when you consider that both groups have a primary aim which relies for its fulfilment on the assistance of the other group. Their aims (journalists to gather information, political PRs to put out information) require what the other group has in abundance (journalists have space, political PRs have content) and in order to do their job well in a competitive market they will use whatever means necessary. This means that, when it suits each group to collude with their 'enemy,' they will. Whilst this could not be further from the ideal of a watchdog function, the closeness allows political journalists much more of an insight into government life than they would ever get from a distance 'overseeing' those they are now colluding with. The problem for democracy arises if journalists savour the collusion to such an extent that they dare not risk their favoured position by reporting or investigating any abuses of power that they come across.

Finally, an assumption prevails that the journalist acting in a watchdog function will have the upper hand. As chapter seven shows, they rarely have this luxury. Political PRs are now very well trained, often former journalists themselves, their press offices are well staffed and their bosses

² See <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk>. For more on Hutton see chapter seven (section 7.7) and chapter five (section 5.4).

³ See chapter three (section 3.7.3).

understand the importance of their work. They are well equipped to stand up to journalists. In fact, many journalists fear that they no longer have the resources necessary to counter the increasingly sophisticated “munitions of the traditional enemy; that journalism is being hung out to dry by the not so hidden persuaders” (Hargreaves, 2003: 180). Both groups have to fight on a daily basis for information and the ability to carry out their own job effectively. Of the three battlegrounds on which political PRs and journalists are always fighting: control of content, agenda and access, political PRs often have control of content and control of access (to the content and to ministers) and political journalists will have control of access to news media space and often the agenda too. This split of battle grounds means that neither side will automatically have an upper hand.

The issues of collusion and political PR assertiveness whilst affecting the journalist as a watchdog in general have, more specifically affected another elements which they must keep in mind whilst they carry out their job, namely acting in the public interest. As discussed in chapter two (section 2.2.2) this is a subjective notion however we are able to investigate whether two requirements of this, (1) being accountable to the public and (2) maintaining objectivity and independence are present in today’s political news industry. To uncover the extent of the impact of the collusive conflictual relationship between political PRs and journalists on the democratic nature of the UK it is essential to understand how well these elements are currently incorporated into the daily role of the journalist.

8.2.4.1 Accountability

If the journalist is supposed to be working in the public interest then they also need to be accountable to the public. There was a very interesting split between my interviewees over who specific journalists felt they were accountable to: the public as a whole or just their potential and actual audiences. Legally journalists must follow libel and intrusion laws, ethically journalists must follow their industry code of practice and officially journalists must follow whatever their employer says within legality. When asked outright however the journalists from the BBC felt very strongly that they were accountable to the general public as a whole.

I had a public responsibility...It is one of the BBC’s greatest strengths. We are still susceptible to pressure and standards and it does not see things gratuitously and this is put into people who are public service broadcasters. Working for public organization and we have standards which are different from the rest because we are more accountable. (J3)

All other journalists though felt a strong accountability but to their own audiences rather than to all of the public.

In the end it is about the relationship with your audience and you would not go on being employed unless the viewers wanted to see you so feel I have a relationship to them to explain and to give them insights of interest to my audience. (J1)

Governments come and go – the media will always be there. The readers we care about – not the government. (J5)

If a journalist feels accountable to the audience for whom they write their loyalty and focus will be towards their audience. A problem arises however when they work too heavily with political PRs. Political PRs, whilst accountable to their boss, work behind the scenes, rarely give attributable quotes and are unknown to the journalists' audience, listening to or watching the news. This leaves them with a vast lack of accountability and should make journalists far more wary of using their information. Politicians felt very strongly about this.

They are not sufficiently accountable. Journalists are accountable to the PCC, their editor and their profession. A spin doctor, depending on who paying is almost out of control. (P6)

I would scrap spin doctors and ask politicians to talk to journalists themselves. Why can't top politicians be available to answer questions everyday... They would not need to be saying anything new, that had not already been told to Parliament, but they would be making themselves much more accountable... Politicians are the accountable ones so if their spin doctor distorts the truth and it damages the minister then they should resign. (P3)

In fact, when I asked any journalist or politician about the accountability of political PRs, not one single interviewee thought they were accountable to the public.

They are not accountable to the public in any way. They are quite self-serving. (J3)

Political communicators are responsible to the political interests that they are serving and there is a general drift to discouraging them to feeling responsible to the public in an absolute sense. (J1)

As journalists often repeat the information given to them by political PRs without attribution (especially in an age reliant on information subsidies), their lack of accountability transfers onto themselves or onto the politician for whom they work. Political PRs can bring a lack of accountability into the whole political news industry as just their presence means incorrect information can be blamed on the source, not the journalist and this insulates journalists from

further accountability. The relationship between political journalists and PRs is thus corrupting the relationship between journalists and their audiences. When journalists collude with PRs they are destroying their accountability to the public and there is little or no reprimand for those who are not accountable.

The problem is that there is no penalty for political journalists who get stories routinely wrong. They simply shrug it off and move on. There is no incentive to check things out properly. (J6)

If there is no incentive within the political news industry to be accountable it seems much less likely journalists will strive to be so. Much of this seems to have come from the elements of competition which changes in the news media have introduced. The amount of competition and the speed at which the news media now works has meant that levels of attribution of information to specific sources has, according to my interviewees, decreased significantly in recent years.

The standard of political journalism has gone down as well because you can now find more and more stories written without attribution. Even the Times has had front page stories with non attribution and this has now spread to broadcast. (J3)

It is a culture of unattribution. There is also a narrow definition of spin-doctors. There is a culture of lobby briefing and unattributable quotes...The phenomenon is older but people such as Joe Haines were not spin doctors. Most would say it has grown from being press officers into a culture of unattribution which means people are not able to trust. (J6)

The case for non-attribution by journalists is strong. If sources can talk without being directly quoted, then much more pertinent information becomes available to journalists (Tiffin, 1989: 120) on a much more frequent basis. A former journalist, Matthew Parris, defends making use of their information, making the case that there is an opportunity for "journalistic irresponsibility as the ultimate safety-valve in a democratic, adversarial society and especially in one where secrecy and a culture of official silence is part of the traditional fabric – as it is in Britain" (Goodman, 2000: 3-6).

The alternative is for press officers to only give fully attributable information but then they would be more cautious and less information would be given out. It is a trade off. If journalists could print only information for which they had named sources there would be fewer lies in the media but there would also be fewer truths. (J6)

Collusion does allow more information to get into the public arena but it also damages and impedes upon the relationship between journalists and the public, and it is this relationship, and

the accountability towards the public, which provides the foundation of the watchdog media. Without a public interest to protect, nor a public to account to, the watchdog has but a derelict house to oversee.

8.2.4.2 *Objectivity and Independence*

The other essential element for a journalist when acting as a watchdog in the public interest is for the journalist to be independent and objective. This is where most contention lies with the changes in the news media and the growth in the number and powers of political PRs. Many academics and commentators feel that the collusive aspect of the political journalist / PR relationship means that any claimed independence is a sham and objectivity is stifled.

The 1977 Royal Commission on the Press concluded by stating that they define freedom of the press as “freedom from restraint which is essential to enable proprietors, editors and journalists to advance the public interest by publishing the facts and opinions without which a democratic electorate cannot make responsible judgements” (Curran & Seaton, 2003: 289). A restraint in this case then must be a lack of independence. Concerns were running so high about a perceived lack of independence that in January 2003, the Phillis committee was set up to consider the “meltdown in the level of trust in government information and political journalists.” (J3) This meltdown has been blamed on a lack of transparency and a perception that ‘spin’ is a continuous feature of the Labour Government. The concerns about lack of transparency do not only apply to the political PRs and politicians however, they apply just as much to views of journalists, who are seen to collude with their enemy in order to make their own lives easier rather than expose corruption and wrongdoing.

Journalists expect transparency and openness from MPs and journalists should do the same. (P5)

We need transparency and should have no cosiness. (PC6)

Clare Short MP agreed with this idea saying that “spin cannot happen without journalists co-operating. It takes two to spin. Journalists really do have to do some serious consideration of their part in spin and this part that journalism takes in damaging democracy. There needs to be some journalistic ethic about it” (Short, 2003). The collusion seems to upset people most as although there is an expectation that political PRs spin, lie and cheat, journalists are considered to work from a more altruistic attitude. They are expected to follow their democratic role of objectivity and independence. Barnett and Gaber seek to show in their research that political entrepreneurs, achieving their aims through media-friendly strategies, make it “increasingly difficult for even the most experienced political journalists to maintain a critical stance” (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 5).

When journalists fail to be objective or independent and collude too much with political PRs then we see the first draft of history coming “from the barrel of a lobby correspondent’s pen, with the ink and often even the words themselves provided by the government” (Cockerell et al, 1984: 10).

Gieber’s requirement that journalists must remain independent from pressures from sources and distanced from any pressures placed upon them from the news bureaucracy in which they work (Gieber, 1964: 223) can surely not stand when we consider the widespread use and reliance on information subsidies. Information subsidies directly counter the idea that journalists are only putting forward information, news and stories which are entirely in the public interest. This dichotomy is put forward by Hargreaves who labels modern journalism the “plaything of corporate public relations experts” and says it is now “not so much a public service as a public health hazard” (Hargreaves, 2003: 12). As seen in chapter seven (section 7.3.2), they are now a permanent and dominating part of the political media landscape and the following opinion was typical.

Political journalists have become very lazy. There is only one decent investigative journalist left in the lobby...Only a small number of people still question as they once did. Even people who have been doing this a long time now realise they have a nice cushy job. The people at the top are very good and will always be very good and they are not particularly lazy but you will be struggling to find more than a handful of them who are really good. (PR1)

The lack of independence is also damaging for those political PRs without easy access to journalists or the skills to learn how to collude. Davis points out that those who cannot provide an information subsidy will be severely disadvantaged. “The fact that journalism is so dependent on public relations material considerably undermines the ideal of an independent fourth estate media. Several groups and constituencies in society lack even the most basic resources required to gain access” (Davis, 2002: 14). This has serious implications for the levels of plurality in the news media. “The health and vitality of the public sphere depends upon the success of a diverse range of political groups and organisations in submitting their arguments and evidence to the news media” (Manning, 2001: 139). A lack of independence is significantly affecting this.

One positive outcome of the relationship though is that, the more conflictual the relationship between political journalists and PRs becomes, the more cynical journalists become and the more they want to remain independent and expose some of the activities of persuasion used by political PRs and politicians. This can only be a good thing for public interest. However the conflict however is not always apparent and whenever collusion returns, the public come a poor second to members of the political elite. There can also be problems when if journalists take the conflict too

far impacting negatively upon objectivity and giving political journalists a longer term bias to their outputs.

The media stopped being an agent of truth, beauty and light in the 1970s when they became campaigners. Always been campaigners and long may there be campaigning journalists but journalists who camp on perceived wrongs not only their own beliefs. Now seeing the politicisation of journalists. (PO1)

This politicisation of journalists has a serious impact upon objectivity by encouraging a trend of editorialising and making comments on news stories, removing neutrality or impartiality. One special advisor talked about a *Today* report when the British government organised a trip to Bali to sort out some problems before a large world convention. He said that Sarah Montague conducted a two way with a reporter and started by asking whether this was just a junket. He replied that it did not seem to be and that a lot of hard work was going on. She finished the piece by signing off that 'well it seems like a junket to me.' The special advisor stated:

This type of editorialising should not be allowed. There are other examples of Sky reading a document and only using the half of it that makes a story ignoring the balancing side. (SA5)

There has become a problem of editorial and news becoming so merged that the reader has no way of knowing what is true. If media do then mislead, "or if readers cannot assess their reporting, the wells of public discourse and public life are poisoned" (O'Neill, 2002) and there is no way of separating pure information from journalistic comments or even fiction.

O'Neill in her 2002 Reith Lecture called for "the press to be free to seek truth and to challenge accepted views" but says this must be done by allowing journalists to put forward diverse views, not letting the whole media organisation represent one section of society. She says that in this current media situation "information is abundant, it's often mixed with misinformation and a little spice of disinformation...and it can be hard to check and test what we read and hear." She wants to find (and does suggest some⁴) ways of telling trustworthy from untrustworthy informants" and "whether and when we are on the receiving end of hype and spin" (O'Neill, 2002).

All this would suggest then that the changes in the news media and in particular the augmented importance of market and the increased reliance on information subsidies have had a negative

⁴ She suggested procedural changes, such as requirements for owners, editors and journalists to declare interests and to distinguish comment from reporting, or by penalties for recirculation of rumours without providing and checking the evidence. She also wants to see chequebook journalists required to disclose who paid whom how much for which 'contribution' (O'Neill, 2002).

affect on whether the journalist can remain objective, or accountable and able to act in the public interest.

8.3 Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore how the changes in the news media, the development of the political PR industry and the collusive conflictual relationship between political journalists and political PRs affects the notion of the news media as the fourth estate and specifically the journalist as a watchdog of the government. The expectations of the public towards the news media; to provide a free flow of accurate and diverse information, in a form that can facilitate and motivate the public to question pre-existing beliefs to facilitate a civic forum and operate as a check and balance on the government have all been impacted upon by the changes in the political news industry. They have undermined them to such an extent that it is often the case that the political journalists are unable to carry out the news media's democratic and common sense expectations successfully.

A fourth estate news media needs to supply their audience with highly accurate information. All interviewees told me that whilst there is high expectation towards accuracy and a strong intent to abide by this, in the rough and tumble of their daily work it sometimes falls by the wayside. When you add problems of trust between the two groups in the political news industry, the levels of accuracy fall even lower and the public could be at a complete loss over whose words to believe. Beyond the accuracy, news should be supplied (either in publication, on line or broadcast) in an easy to understand, accessible format. The collusive conflictual relationship, alongside the fact that 24 hour news means there is so much space to fill has provided an atmosphere where metacoverage thrives. There are stories about stories, journalists interviewing other journalists and a general lack of debate. This not only stifles the number of views which can be provided to the public but also tends to blur the information disseminated, falsely promotes the importance of the story being highlighted and confuses the audience about what is important. Increased competition causes economic pressures which means there is far less time for each journalist to work on their stories. This leads to a reduction in the amount of background information published. It is this background which makes news understandable to the public and provides them with a context in which to place the stories published. Without this context, information in a pure comprehensible format disappears.

To be an effective fourth estate, journalists in the news media need to provide a plurality of voices in each news story so a variety of views are put forward. Tabloidisation has had a significant effect on the news media's ability to do this as they are pressurised to work under a herd instinct which makes them scared to be different. This means only a limited number of viewpoints are ever heard. The increased understanding, importance but also fear of the news media in politics

means that politicians feel providing journalists with ideas and details rather than decisions will get them labelled as soft or indecisive. As a result the news media are only given and so publish decisions and outcomes rather than details and debates. This strongly stifles the number of viewpoints put forward.

An expectation that the news media facilitate a space where the public can respond and join in with the current political debates also exists. Changes in the news media and the growth of a collusive conflictual relationship have affected the news media's ability to facilitate this public sphere. The news media have taken over many of the former roles of politicians (something which could be seen as positive for involving the public), however, as journalists have got too close to the debates they have not only pushed politicians to one side they could also be accused of pushing the public out, so they are reduced to no more than spectators on the sidelines. When journalists are getting on and colluding with politicians and their PRs they continue to push out the public, thinking only of how their specific audience will react. This collusive situation potentially prevents the public wanting to get involved.

Finally, for the journalist to be able to act as a check and balance on the other estates of democracy, they need to conduct their work with the public interest permanently in mind. This ideal is supported by the public when they are questioned yet my research shows that journalists do not think in the public interest, they (due to the growth in importance of the market) think in their audience's interest. The growth of competition has forced journalists to conduct much of their work with an information subsidy and so whilst they are able to turn information provided to them to the needs, viewpoints and idiosyncrasies of their audiences they are unable to tailor it to the needs of the public as a whole.

If the journalist is working in the public interest then they also need to be accountable to that public. Most journalists interviewed (those from the BBC were an exception) felt a strong accountability but it was to their own audiences rather to the public as a whole. Those who work in political PR felt no accountability to anyone except those who pay their wages. Considering the huge rise in the number and power of political PRs, the reliance by journalists on their information subsidies, and the collusive conflictual relationship between political PRs and journalists, this is of significant concern as those who now play a major role in supplying information to the public (the political PRs) feel no accountability towards them at all.

The final necessity for a fourth estate news media is for the journalist to be objective and independent. This was highly contentious during my research and I found that many feel very strongly that the collusive aspect of the political journalist / PR relationship means that any claimed independence is a sham and that a journalist's viewpoints are rarely objective. As Barnett and Gaber seek to show in their research, political entrepreneurs, achieving their aims through

media-friendly strategies, make it “increasingly difficult for even the most experienced political journalists to maintain a critical stance” (Barnett & Gaber, 2001: 5). This is a particularly dangerous situation as not only does it mean that those political PRs who are well connected can have a strong effect, it means those political PRs who are not well connected have an especially feeble effect, are severely disadvantaged and their viewpoints are easily outshone by those with the better training, contacts and money. Davis’ research points out that there are several groups and constituencies in society who lack even the most basic resources required to gain access. (Davis, 2003: 14). Their lack of access not only limits the number of voices heard in the media but also the number of voices even a journalist has with which to comprehend the background to any story.

CHAPTER NINE – CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Introduction

I set out on this research journey to find out just who is the political news gatekeeper. To do this I wanted to identify the changes in the news media and analyse how they had affected the working lives of political journalists and scrutinize how political organisations incorporate the modern news media processes and requirements into their communication organisation, strategy and policies. I then wanted to use the results of my analysis to evaluate and calculate the nature of the current relationship between political journalists and political PRs. I finally aimed to discover how this relationship affects the notion of the news media as the fourth estate.

Chapter seven considered the specific question of how the relationship between political PRs and journalists has affected the expectation that the news media function as a fourth estate. It concluded that the changes in the news media and the way that political public relations has grown to encompass these changes has had a significant yet detrimental effect on the ability of the news media to hold the government to account. I now want to put these conclusions into a wider context to analyse how they impact upon the structure of the political news industry as a whole and how this changed political news industry impacts upon the democratic society in which it functions.

9.2 Overall conclusions

There are three main conclusions to be drawn from my research and all should cause concern for those who view the news media as an integral element of a liberal representative democracy. Firstly, powerful and well connected new players; political PRs, have now established themselves in the political news industry. They are dedicated political media sources who devote a large amount of their time to either providing political journalists with information or defending their bosses or causes from negative stories. Secondly, there is no longer a single political news gatekeeper. The changes in the news media, the development of the political PR and the complexities of modern news technologies mean that there is no longer a simple flow of information from a source, through a journalist and editor and into print. The gatekeeping process has got much more complex and the diffusion of players involved has reached such a level that it is debatable if there is a process at all. Finally, the result of all the changes in the news media, the dramatic growth in size and power of the political public relations industry and the collusive conflictual relationship in play means that not only are journalists hindered in carrying out the news media's democratic obligations but also that those in the news media find it increasingly

difficult to effectively defend their obligations and journalists risk failing in their role as a watchdog.

9.2.1 Rise of the dedicated political media source

The establishment of a new player has greatly affected the relationships between those in the political news industry. It effectively places a barrier between the politicians and political journalists and, whilst protecting the interests and time of the politicians, has meant that much information given to journalists comes from a step away from the original source.

The political news industry, consisting of those who contribute significantly to producing political news from both the news media and politics, at the time of Tunstall's research,¹ contained only two groups, political journalists and politicians. There were a small number of political PRs scattered around but they were few and far between. Since then, a whole new group has emerged into the industry who are as determined, competent and as politically in-tune as the journalists that Tunstall was studying. The journalists who were once dealing with politicians (who spent only a very little of their time dealing with the media) are now dealing with professional, political PRs who often spend all their time dealing with the media. This has had a huge effect on the political news industry, increasing its size and complicating the relationships within it.

Within the political news industry a whole structure has developed for political PRs to work in. It is a structure which has been highly influenced by the characteristics of the modern news media. It mirrors the organisational composition of the news media and matches its 24 hour, 7 day a week outlook, accommodates extensive press offices and has prompted professionalism rarely seen previously in this area. The structure of political public relations does not just set itself up as a tool for disseminating information. It also uses political PRs to obscure information and defend the organisations of which they are a part. Political public relations is no longer a 'nice to have' department to tag onto the side of an organisation. It is now vital and integral to the basic structure of any political organisation and, as a result of this, the power and authority of those working in this industry has risen considerably.

The political PR is usually a determined, highly educated, self-confident, approachable person who has a great amount of foresight and understands how the news media works, how a journalist thinks and what information they will need. Their knowledge is often a consequence of their previous involvement in this circular industry and many political PRs have worked across the industry in differing job titles. The circular nature of the industry helps them to build relationships

¹ At the end of the 1960s.

with the political journalists with whom they work, who are so vital to their success as a political PR. The circular nature also makes entry to the industry very difficult for those without previous political experience or existing connections. This maintains the insular attitudes towards others in the political news industry and increases the feeling of exclusion by those not working in the Westminster Village.

A further element of change that the rise of dedicated media sources has introduced, is that journalists now no longer have to go directly to politicians and political PRs. Often their sources come to them. Before the rise of political PRs, politicians did not have time to seek out journalists, journalists had to physically wait in the Lobby in order to speak to them. Political PRs are employed to specifically seek out journalists and feed them with information. This means they not only go to journalists but also that they ensure the information they provide is in a format which is easy to comprehend and use and often timed to meet their schedules and deadline demands. The change in the flow of information from political PRs to journalists has meant that many political PRs are effectively providing an information subsidy. This has changed the nature of the notion of a source. Whilst often in the past a source has been either a person or simply a piece of information, current viewpoints see the source as an active, often proactive, individual providing information to journalists in a simple comprehensible format which is easy to develop into news. These sources (political PRs) have a huge range of procedures, tactics and technologies at their fingertips to ensure their tasks are completed with maximum success.

With the political PR effectively watching over the political journalist and the political journalist having their work doubled in trying to watch over not just the politicians but also the political PRs, the separation of powers has become increasingly complex, tense and far from democratically efficient. The political PRs have effectively become the fifth estate outlined in the introduction. They are not taking over and removing the fourth estate but working in the same democratic sphere, watching over the political journalists. The fifth estate has muscled in on the space that the fourth estate once enjoyed complete control over and, in the process, they have snatched away many of their powers. They now wrestle for control over all political content and can be very effective in preventing a journalist's access to politicians. They have become an extra layer that political journalists must get through and they have at their disposal extensive training, budgets and knowledge to make that layer as difficult to penetrate as possible.

The changes in the news media and the increased use of these procedures, tactics and technologies have significantly increased the importance of political PRs and their levels of power within government or political parties have risen dramatically. Their presence has also changed the whole dynamic of political news and they add an additional layer between the political estates. This has

had a significant effect on the way that journalists work and their ability to carry out the news media's democratic obligations.

9.2.2 No single political news gatekeeper now

The rise of the political PR means that there is no longer a single political news gatekeeper who can be credited with protecting access to news publications. Whilst political journalists still have a major role, numerous other players (mainly political PRs but also groups such as media owners, audiences and advertisers) have crowded around the political news industry to such an extent that there is no longer a simple flow of information and every item of information being published has had a struggle take place over it.

The power to directly decide what information would be included as news in the media is no longer in the hands of the political journalist. The introduction of a dominating, powerful and articulate group to the political news industry (the political PRs) means that a continuous battle now takes place between the two groups over who controls the gates through which information passes. Control is focused on access, content and the agenda and confrontations over all three are commonplace.

Political journalists and PRs are each equally reliant on each other to conduct their jobs successfully. Political PRs need access to news media space and political journalists need content with which to fill the space. Increased competition means that there is a greater reliance for journalists on the information subsidies which political PRs can provide and these subsidies provide political PRs with more opportunities to express stronger control over content. The growth in the number of political PRs however means that journalists now have many more to go to so can cultivate sources in more areas and can afford to annoy one or two along the way. This means that the power of political PRs over content is balanced out by the power of journalists over access. Who controls the agenda is much more fluid however and when it is not being set by events, it can switch between the two groups in the political news industry. Neither group then is guaranteed the upper hand in this relationship. There is no longer a simple flow of information, through specific gates, guarded and moulded by news media players, to become news. Both groups operate in a 'premiership' of an ever changing political and media environment where they must work together and against each other, attacking using their power when they have it and defending themselves as best they can when they do not. The complex news media environment in which they now work has led to complex relationships which can best titled 'collusive conflict'. If there is a gatekeeper at all then it would provide a notion of the political PRs and journalists together, guarding news and information gates against the public, negotiating and bargaining for their own successes and potentially alienating those outside the political news industry.

This idea is complicated further when we consider that rarely are political PRs on one side working with or against political journalists. There are many hundreds of political PRs and each one has personal, organisational and departmental viewpoints to push. Even those working for the same party are often pushing different lines or stories, depending on which part of the party they work for or who their particular boss is. Departmental civil servants work for one united government but they will be working from the specific viewpoint of their department and it is that viewpoint they push across. This internal competition amongst political PRs allows political journalists opportunities to increase their abilities to get control of access, content and the agenda.

One interesting idea which developed throughout the interviewing was how, whilst the political PR represents a party (who represent a set of people with firm political viewpoints), or a politician (who represents a set of people from a specific geographical area) or a minister (who represents a certain element of organisational society), each newspaper, publication or programme now has its own constituency too. This is not just a constituency as in the idea of an audience but the idea that sections of the news media are now representing a specific group of people. The political journalist, acting objectively and with independence, has the opportunity to be an effective political news gatekeeper as they are using an unbiased judgement to decide which viewpoints to put forward and what stance to take in their article or editorial. The idea of publications now representing a certain group in society automatically limits the range of viewpoints which can be put forward by the journalist and means that some political news information is automatically discounted. Not only does this mean that within each publication there will be a very thin range of viewpoints put forward but that those which are not in accordance with the views of that constituency will be rejected at the news production stage and not make it anywhere near print. Any opportunities political journalists do have to gatekeep then are engaged very early on and they are thus limiting their pool of information from which to choose.

A further problem with this idea of the news media organisations having their own constituencies, is that members of the public who do not feel like they are captured by any of these constituencies will have no representation and no way to push for any either. Once they feel excluded from the news media they do not have a public sphere to hear others' views nor to be able to make any of their own heard. At least when the only political news gatekeeper was the journalist they were able to put their opinions to journalists who would (hopefully) take each case on its merits. Now there is no opportunity for this. This gives rise to a potential disenfranchisement of a large number of people. As my research did not look at the roles of audiences, or their views, I am not qualified to say whether or not they do feel disenfranchised, yet it must be recognised that this situation does provide a significant potential for it. With the news media acting as advocates of particular

viewpoints, not just representatives of their readers, the opportunities for using the news media as a civic forum diminish and many could be unable to get involved in democracy.

9.2.3 It is increasingly difficult for journalists and the news media to successfully fill their role in the UK's liberal representative democracy

The original research question asked if the current relationship between political journalists and political PRs affected the role of the news media as the fourth estate. I must conclude that the relationship does effect the role and that journalists, through no fault of their own, are finding it increasingly difficult to oversee politicians. Although journalists in the news media are often willing to provide a fourth estate on behalf of the public and watch over the government in order to protect the public interest, the changes in the news media as an industry and the rise of the political PR, have made this harder and harder.

Whilst it is the news media which is tasked with fulfilling the publics' idealistic expectations of acting as a fourth estate on behalf of the public, it is the journalists working inside the news media who must implement these aspirations. The changes which have taken place in the news media in the last thirty years have made these obligations increasingly difficult to accomplish. The changes: the introduction and growth of 24-hour news channels, the proliferation of channels and publications, the growth and increased use of technology, a tabloidisation of the news media and new objectives of media owners, have impacted upon journalists significantly. The changes have prompted a new era of news media competitiveness, a far more pressurised and complex working environment for journalists and an environment in which to work which is seen in a very negative light by their audiences.

The journalists I interviewed were aware that there were democratic expectations upon them yet seemed thwarted in their attempts to uphold these by the environment in which they were working. Both organisational and logistical barriers were preventing them. The impact of the 24-hours news media, the proliferation of channels and the growth of technology has meant journalists are expected to produce so much copy that they have little time to think outside of their immediate role of producing a specific amount of news coverage per day. Images of themselves taking on a role as a watchdog fulfilling a democratic function get immediately pushed to the back of the mind as deadlines approach and political PRs badger them. The effort of just carrying out their most basic tasks is such that obligations towards those outside of their news organisation, such as to the public, or for the ideals placed upon them in a democracy, fall by the wayside.

This then means that the democratic obligations of the news media could be left unfulfilled by the news media of today. Journalists could be unable to implement their obligations due to the

changes in the news media, the development of the political PR industry and the collusive conflictual relationship which has developed between political journalists and political PRs. The idealistic obligations placed upon the news media and the journalists working within it; to provide a wide range viewpoints, pure, understandable accurate information, a civic bulletin board, to think in the public interest, to be accountable to the public and to be objective and independent, are all undermined by the pressures placed upon the journalist from the news media and political PRs.

The ideal of the news media supplying a variety of voices and viewpoints from which the audience can make up their minds about who to believe or what ideas are in discussion is failing as the range of opinions in the news media becomes increasingly limited. Competition and tabloidisation are forcing journalists into writing in a very two dimensional manner which takes into account only simplistic arguments and shies away from complex, multi-dimensional or non conventional debates. Metacoverage and 'stories about stories' further restrict the range of opinions in circulation and complicate ideas over what is news, why stories are of relevance and heightens the problems of a circular industry where political journalists have more in common with those they are supposed to be watching over than with the audience to whom they are reporting. The growth of dependence on information subsidies has meant that the role of the market has risen in importance and journalists, much against their wishes, have to rely on political PRs to supply their information and risk being held to ransom if they renege on their deals. This leaves journalists in a difficult position when it comes to maintaining their objectivity and independence.

There is one final issue here about the lack of respect towards the traditional democratic obligations of the news media. The significant growth of the political PR industry and the increased importance within politics of political PRs means that the balance of power can be snatched away from political journalists. On the occasions where the political PRs get their own way over journalists, power is taken away from those with accountability to the audiences and pushed towards those who feel no accountability to anyone except those who pay their wages. Considering the huge rise in the number and power of political PRs, the reliance by journalists on information subsidies, and the collusive conflictual relationship between political PRs and journalists, this is of significant concern. Those who now play a major role in supplying information to the public may feel no accountability towards them at all, only to the cause, person or organisation that is paying their wages.

The conclusions that I have drawn from my research suggest that the public should be far from secure with the actions of the news media on their behalf. They should be questioning the ability of journalists to act as a watchdog on their behalf. This is a result of the developments in a media

which has significantly changed since the 1960s (when Tunstall conducted his research) and has changed unrecognisably from the 1700s when Burke first used the term: the fourth estate. The fifth estate of political PR has developed and grown to such an extent that the fourth estate has had to alter its perceptions, modes of working and even role in democratic society to accommodate it. This must cause concern to those who have previously classed the news media as an essential element of democratic society and must prompt investigations into the future of the news media and the system of democracy in the UK.

9.3 Future research opportunities for studying the political news industry

For future research there are four avenues which would be particularly interesting to develop.

Firstly, I think it would be interesting to continue on the same themes I have developed here but to follow the exact methodology used by Tunstall; his format of interview followed by questionnaire. Tunstall was fortunate that (for this area of his research) there was at the time a very small circle of people to interview and he was successful in getting many of those he had interviewed to complete a questionnaire to supplement his research. This is unusual in itself as very often questionnaires are used first as a sample to determine those that the researcher feels would make data rich sources for interviews. That Tunstall succeeded by interviewing first is not only a testament to his abilities as a researcher but also makes for interesting reading when we know that the questions on which the questionnaire is based were devised as the result of long, intricate interviews. This means the questions would have been perfectly focused and asked knowing that a tangible, quantifiable answer would be possible. To replicate this methodology would provide numerous avenues for development of research into the relationship between political PRs and journalists.

Secondly, very early on in my research process, I had to decide whether to study the content of the news media or those people involved in it. As an original inspiration had been Tunstall's research on the Lobby Correspondents I chose to continue in his vein and consider the roles and responsibilities of the people involved. What would be interesting now however would be to study the content involved in the political news industry. It would have been incredibly interesting to start in the political public relations industry and follow a piece of information from the very start of its journey in politics, through the planning stage, through to its dissemination and watch the attitudinal tactics used by the political PR. This would then be followed through by moving into the news media and, having noted the relationship that the political PR had with the journalist, see how the journalist deals with the information, who else they contact and how the story is finally written up and published.

A similar way to do this would be to sit with a copy of a paper or running order in a news room with the editor and journalists who produced it and ask them to explain where the information came from, who chased it, whether it was from a press release, briefing, background, leak, whether it came from a special advisor, government departmental press officer or party communications officer. Both these methods would provide an insight into what currently is considered to be a political news story and what is, today, political news. This would thus feed into a study of political news values. The analysis of news values provided by Galtung and Ruge (1965) would set up an essential background which could be developed to establish how many of these news values are still in place. This could be used to extend my analysis of the news media and political public relations industry and discuss how the changes (detailed in chapters four and five) have affected those news values which are in place today.

A further avenue of interest would be to consider how the development of political public relations has affected the roles of alternative media. My research focused entirely on the mainstream news media however there are many newer types of news media, mainly focusing on the internet (such as podcasting and blogging) but also including areas like community radio, which have arisen since the changes in the news media (often actually as a result of changes in the news media) and which it would be suspected have been impacted far less by the prominence of political PRs.

Finally as my research developed, it seemed to me that there is a situation evolving where the supremacy of the audience has grown to the detriment of the public. As I have not constructed any research on the role of the public in the political news industry I could not take this further yet an issue which arose when interviewing political journalists, was that they did not (unless they worked for the BBC) say they felt accountable to the public or society, only to their readers, listeners or television audiences. If this is the case it would cause a huge amount of disenfranchisement amongst the public. I found this notion incredibly interesting and I would be keen to develop what is only currently an idea into something more substantial. I would therefore like to use audience research to discover if there is public disenfranchisement over politics and whether the public blame this in any way on the types and content of the news media. This would be an entirely new area of research to me but the conclusions of this piece of research are potentially very important for the placement and protectionism of the public in a democracy and so I think it is essential the actual rather than just potential threats are considered.

If I were to conduct similar research to this again there are two areas I would like to focus on to tighten up the processes used in the interview stages.

Firstly, I would like to be able to conduct the interviews as close to each other as possible. This would prevent the variants of the influence that external factors (in my case big news stories being reported on the very topic of my research) can cause. The development of a huge story (Hutton) focusing so closely on my topic of research meant that more and more information, analysis and debate was taking place on my research area as the story was developing and the inquiry was taking place. This meant that in certain periods the relationship between political PRs and journalists was the number one story in every news media channel and publication. At other points it had a much lower profile. Whilst I did my best to counter this by providing information (see appendix three) on the events which were taking place at the time, I would be very interested to see whether my interviewees would have answered my questions any differently had they been interviewed at a different time.

Secondly, I would like to know if my background in the industry affected the responses I was given in any way. Firstly whether I got more or less 'yes' responses to my original letters because I work in the industry and secondly whether my interviewees' responses were actually tailored towards someone au fait with the political news industry terminology or whether they felt they should be more or less honest with me? Maybe they thought I would know so much background that they may not be able to cover up things they were not happy saying or whether they covered up more because they would know that I am familiar with others in the industry. I would be keen to see, if a different researcher (using similar methodologies and investigating the same areas but without the background interests in the industry) would have elicited similar responses to myself.

9.4 Implications for research on the political news industry

There are two significant implications of my research for the political news industry; the first is that there seems to be a need for a debate surrounding the realistic role of the news media in a representative liberal democracy. The second is that it becomes clear that there is a need for further work to be conducted on the theorisation behind the research into the political news industry. My aim was for this research to contribute some way towards both of these but there is a lot more to be done so that the effect of the changes in the news media, the growth of the political public relations industry and the relationship between the groups can be fully understood and any necessary actions taken.

In the eyes of an ideal representative democracy, journalists are obligated to follow the responsibilities given to them through the news media's position as the fourth estate. The obligations and responsibilities are essential to hold up a government to the levels of scrutiny necessary to ensure they think continually with the public in mind. It must be conceded however that the political news industry has changed significantly since the time that Burke labelled the

press the fourth estate. In that time the press have become a huge global corporate business, the medium for news dissemination has expanded dramatically from a few newspapers to thousands of television channels and radio stations, hundreds of national, regional and speciality newspapers and over 8 billion web pages. Many of these are devoted entirely to news. It is not just the press which have changed either. An entire sector within the political news industry has developed to feed this increased appetite for news; political public relations. Its growth, particularly in the last 20 years, has effectively dwarfed the journalists working in the political news industry and political PRs have a wide range of skills, tactics, procedures and knowledge at their disposal as well as specialist training and often decent pay. Their impact upon the political news industry and the political journalists within it has been substantial. Political PRs have effectively become a fifth estate, watching over the journalists to ensure they control as many opportunities for political news gatekeeping as possible.

The situation with the changes and developments in the news media and the extensive growth of political PR means that perhaps a more realistic approach to the role of media in a representative liberal democracy is necessary. As my research has shown, the role of the news media under a liberal representative democracy is now unable to fulfil its former obligations. Journalists are no longer able to effectively facilitate a civic forum, provide a platform for debate or effectively watch over those in power. A debate is necessary within the research arena to look back at the basics of how and why the news media were placed in the spectrum of democratic responsibilities originally and consider if there is another route which the news media could more effectively and realistically take.

The second implication of my research is that it must be accepted that the roles, responsibilities and structures of political public relations as an industry and political PRs as professionals are significantly under theorised. The reason is simple; it is a new sector which has only developed significantly in the past few years. Whilst political PRs did exist prior to this, there were far fewer of them and they stayed very much in the background. Any research which did cover them looked at public relations practitioners as a whole, a group which is as vast in numbers as it is in width of areas covered. Whilst some theories can be extracted from this larger group there are many elements of the role of the political PR which are unique to the political news industry and it is essential for researchers to continue to look at these practitioners in particular. Their importance to political journalists gives them a influential place in society and it is this importance which makes them essential to study.

9.5 A final word

The current relationship between political journalists and political PRs has had a significant impact on the ability of the news media to act as a fourth estate and hinders the ability of the journalist be a watchdog of the government on behalf of the public. Political PRs have caused huge waves for the notion of a fourth estate media. They have positioned themselves as a fifth estate, ensured dependency amongst journalists and focus wholly on persuading journalists to come round to their point of view. They are well equipped, well trained and very knowledgeable on the news media. Political journalists must be highly proficient in their job and determined in their defence of democracy if they are to stand a chance against the political PRs' influence.

The emergence on the scene of political PRs occurred alongside the growth and usage of new technologies in the political news industry. Both these aspects have diminished the opportunities for news to flow directly from sources, to journalists and into publication, dispersing the responsibility for gatekeeping and making news flows increasingly complex. The powers to direct the news flow; control of the news agenda, control of access or control of the content are often moving from one side to the other and so it can be said that no specific group can be classed as the gatekeeper.

The result of all these changes is that not only are journalists hindered in carrying out the news media's democratic obligation to act as a watchdog but also that the news media is no longer able to effectively defend their democratic obligations and can no longer completely fulfil their role as a fourth estate. Whilst journalists in the news media may still aim to watch over the government and work as a fourth estate, the establishment of a fifth estate of political public relations has diminished their ability to be consistently successful in this ambition.

Looking back to chapter one, Enoch Powell was quoted as saying: "for a politician to complain about the press is like a ship's captain complaining about the sea." Not only is this quote still true but in this new news media age, where political PRs are as prominent in the political news industry as political journalists, it has never been more so. The players in the political news industry may battle and fight on some occasions and collude and cooperate on others but whether they like it or not they are bound together and highly dependent upon each other and this has significant, and concerning, implications for the democratic nature of society in the UK today.

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APPENDIX ONE – INTERVIEW GUIDES

A1.1 Issues to be covered

A. Type of relationship between journalists and political PRs

Characterisations: of the types of relationships: dysfunctional family / resembles dance / mutual interdependence / dialectical relationship / action & reaction.

Models of relationship: adversarial / conspiratorial / collusive / exchange / guard dog / watchdog / lap dog / attack dog / spaniel.

Issues impacting on relationships: structured and hierarchical access / dominant framework of views within society / differences in the relationship between print and broadcast journalists.

B Journalists as professionals

Development: golden age of journalism / market-driven journalism / tabloidisation from top / professionalisation from below.

Characteristics: public interest / public sphere / social responsibility / professional responsibility / accountability / autonomy / objectivity / ethic of public service / gatekeepers / advocates / conformity / recognition knowledge / procedural knowledge / accounting knowledge.

Not professional: low knowledge base / selectivity with whom they deal / deny responsibility for negative consequences of reports / apply a stronger standard to others than themselves / lack of licensing procedure / no standardised training / no system to expel unscrupulous members.

Professional: Works in professional manner / holds professional attitude / serves the general population / upholds a duty within society / has a professional ideology / organised into associations / form voluntary press councils / have principles of good practice.

C Political PRs as professionals

Development: Following the US / Millbankisation / Professionalised campaigns / NL a one off or following a trend? / Campaign studies

Definition:

- (1) Pertaining to, proper to, or connected with a or one's profession or calling
- (2) Engaged in one of the learned or skilled professions, or in a calling considered socially superior to a trade or handicraft
- (3) Applied to one who makes a trade of anything that is properly pursued from higher motives
- (4) Reaching a standard or having the quality expected of a professional person or his work; competent in the manner of a professional
- (5) Skilled in the theoretic or scientific parts of a trade or occupation as distinct from its merely mechanical parts

Characteristics: truth essential or will lose authority / proactivity / working 'surgically' / good radar system / speak the languages of many different groups & translate between one and another / central planning and controlling of all campaign communication / activities and employment of professional experts in PR, marketing and advertising / success of a spin doctor: the reporter treats them as a usual news source or uses the favourable bias or story angle offered by the spin doctor.

D Techniques & tactics used by political PRs

Above the line and organisational measurable, below the line much harder to identify and establish.

Above the line: Government or party announcements, placing questions, press releases, press conferences, statements, announcements within speeches, stage events, ministerial statements, respond to planted questions, making statement to commons committee, using a ministerial broadcast, publishing announcements / rebuttal / prebutter / publicising interviews and speeches / reaction to interviews and speeches / staying on message / talking in soundbites / leaking / exclusives / guides to dealing with press.

Below the line: spinning, briefings / setting news agenda / driving news agenda / firebreaking, diversionary tactics / stoking the fire, extending an oppositions media coverage / building up a personality / undermining a personality / pre-empting / kite-flying / raising or lowering expectations / milking or squeezing a story / throwing out the bodies, putting out a release when journalists distracted by other stories / laundering, put out bad news at same time as good / white commonwealth, giving info to favoured journalists to keep all on toes and in line / bullying and Intimidation / setting rules of engagement / working around deadlines / entering news cycle at earliest possible time / repeatedly re-entering news cycle / giving opposition no room to breathe / moving slowly to correct misleading impressions when can benefit from false picture.

Organisational tactics: co-ordination meetings / presentation classes / bypassing traditional news media / war book / the grid / synchronisation / utilisation of technology for rapid rebuttal / meticulous monitoring.

E Journalists as gatekeepers?

Impacts upon journalists as gatekeepers: stopwatch culture / organisational constraints / routinization of work / response to routine bureaucratic problems / bureaucratisation of social perception / importance of the beat / caught in a tug of war between the sources and the public / peers becoming sources / primary definers, consensus / toleration / conflict / propaganda model.

Critique: Implies only one gate / implies only one set of selection criteria / simple view of the supply of the news / individualises decision making / assumes there is a given, finite, knowable reality of events in the real world.

Issues to consider: gatekeeping between correspondents: do political correspondents report stories from political PRs before specialist correspondents can point out the spin? / working with tainted information.

F Political PRs as gatekeepers

Issues to consider: replacing the notion of an all-powerful media with that of an all powerful spin-doctor or media manipulator / PR and journalism industries converging / public relations democracy / public relations state / dominant political economy.

Information subsidies: the more authoritative and credible the source, the easier it is to accept statements without checking thus making production cost less.

Considered gatekeepers: strategic communicators, third force in news making, carried out by paid experts on behalf of institutions, lobbies and interests, use all forms of intelligence gathering and techniques of influence as well as mass media, often operate outside sphere of publicity / official sources, associated with the apparatus of government and the state, enjoy crucial advantages in news access because treating official sources as the first port of call is easy, on the inside / journalists gradually absorb source values until they become virtual allies so even if a company or person cannot influence the specific news item they can still frame the way a subject or perspective is viewed / power outside Parliament.

Access by political PRs: politicians in power have the most money with which to employ the best news managers / those who are not slick will be ignored / clever use of PR techniques can allow the unequal and non-corporate groups to gain foothold in the media content / the process of media production is one which can be studied, understood and manipulated by those who wish to gain access.

G Changes in the relationship and the reason why?

Organisational: impact of media ownership / growing fragmentation of the electronic media / 24 hour news / growth in media outlets / more players in the media world, investors, parent corporations, media firms, news department, news sources, advertisers, news consumers & the public / political news programmes setting news agenda / media taking over vital functions of political parties / media moving into the centre of the political system.

Societal: proliferation of means of communication / media tolerance has increased for previously unaccepted stances / cultural development around the status of celebrity for individuals and personalisation of corporations / media becoming more powerful economic and political actors / gulf between media and party agendas increasing / media malaise.

Journalism profession: increased competition in political reporting / changing nature of the profession / less space and prestige for political news / journalists now less dependent on

governmental sources / autonomous press / marginalisation of parliament as a source of news / re-evaluation of what is news / fickle newspaper support for parties / increased use of technology changing working practices of journalists / dependence on information subsidy / personality driven form of journalism.

Political profession: professionalisation of party communications / more advocates / governments losing elitist position / what is political is now less clear cut / permanent campaign / growing competence at strategic communications / adaptation of institutions and practices of politics and government to the central role of mass media / expansion in political parties communication staffs / weakening of political consensus and authority / parties using political marketing.

Relationship: trade offs / encouragement to build strong working relationships / deference / distained verses sacerdotal / particular configuration of politics in the 1990s where Labour was exploiting atmosphere in the country as a whole so little resistance to the news management by journalists.

A1.2 Outline of questions to be asked

Background / personal:

To all interviewees: Approval structure / Career progression / Daily routine / Involvement with media / political PRs / Position and job role / Reporting structure / When did you join your industry?

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
A	<p><u>Characterisations of the types of relationships</u> How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics? Do you trust political journalists?</p> <p><u>Models of relationship</u> In general how would you summarise the relationship between journalists and political PRs? How would you summarise your personal relationships with journalists?</p> <p><u>Issues impacting on relationships</u> How would you define a political story? Are there any differences in the way you treat print and broadcast journalists?</p>	<p><u>Characterisations of the types of relationships</u> How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics? Do you trust political PRs?</p> <p><u>Models of relationship</u> In general, how would you summarise the relationship between journalists and political PRs? How would you summarise your personal relationships with political PRs?</p> <p><u>Issues impacting on relationships</u> How would you define a political story? Do you feel you get treated differently from print / broadcast journalists</p>	<p><u>Characterisations of the types of relationships</u> How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics? Do you trust political journalists? Do you trust political PRs?</p> <p><u>Models of relationship</u> How would you summarise the relationship between journalists and political PRs? How would you summarise the relationship between politicians and political PRs? How would you summarise the relationship between politicians and journalists?</p> <p><u>Issues impacting on relationships</u> How would you define a political story? Do you feel political PRs treat print / broadcast journalists differently?</p>

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
B	<p><u>Development</u> Which political journalists do you rate? What skills or attributes do they have which you admire?</p> <p><u>Characteristics</u> What skills do you think you have in common with political journalists? On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 highest status within the public eye, where would you place political journalists? What are the most important characteristics of a good journalist? What skills do journalists need?</p> <p><u>Professional?</u> Do you consider journalists to be professionals?</p>	<p><u>Development</u> Which other political journalists do you rate? What skills or attributes do they have which you admire?</p> <p><u>Characteristics</u> Do you think of yourself as a public servant? What values are highest in your mind as you write? Who do you see as your audience as you write? On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 highest status within the public eye, where would you place political journalists? What are the most important characteristics of a good journalist? What skills do journalists need?</p> <p><u>Professional?</u> Do you consider yourself to be a professional? How do you measure the success of your work?</p>	<p><u>Development</u> Which political journalists do you rate? What skills or attributes do they have which you admire?</p> <p><u>Characteristics</u> On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 highest status within the public eye, where would you place political journalists? What are the most important characteristics of a good journalist? What skills do journalists need?</p> <p><u>Professional?</u> Do you consider journalists to be professionals?</p>

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
C	<p><u>Development</u> How would you characterise 'Millbankisation'? Do you see today's style of spin as something which is here to stay?</p> <p><u>Characteristics</u> What would be your description of a spin doctor? Do you describe yourself as a spin doctor? How do you describe your job to people you meet from outside the political world? How do you feel that those outside the political and media world feel about political PRs? How do you feel those inside this world feel about political PRs?</p> <p><u>Not professional / Professional</u> Do you consider yourself to be a professional? Why? When you work do you see the journalist or their readers as your audience? How can you measure the success of your work?</p>	<p><u>Development</u> How would you characterise 'Millbankisation'? Do you see today's style of spin as something which is here to stay? How is professionalism pushed in the newsroom?</p> <p><u>Characteristics</u> What percentage of your day do you spend talking to political PRs? Are there any political PRs you particularly rate or would always trust their information? What would be your description of a spin doctor? How would you describe the work of political PRs to those outside the news and political world?</p> <p><u>Not professional / Professional</u> Do you consider political PRs to be professionals? Why? What skills do you think you have in common with political PRs?</p>	<p><u>Development</u> How would you characterise 'Millbankisation'? Do you see today's spin as a blip or here to stay?</p> <p><u>Characteristics</u> What is your initial opinion of political PRs? How would you describe the work of political PRs to those outside the news and political world? What would be your description of a spin doctor?</p> <p><u>Not professional / Professional</u> Do you consider political PRs to be professionals? Why?</p>

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
D	<p><u>Techniques used</u></p> <p>Can you describe the activities of a spin doctor? Lots of former political PRs and political journalists have described the tactics used within their autobiographies, give list. Which of these tactics do you use? Which other tactics do you think take place? Are there any techniques you consider unethical? Do you know of any documents detailing tactics to be used when working with the media? How would you describe your product?</p>	<p><u>Techniques used</u></p> <p>Can you describe the activities of a spin doctor? Lots of former political PRs and political journalists have described the tactics used within their autobiographies, give list. Which of these tactics have you experienced first hand? Which other tactics do you think take place? Which tactics do you think are most successful? Are there any techniques you consider unethical? What tactics do you use to defend yourself? What tactics do you use to get information from political PRs?</p>	<p><u>Techniques used</u></p> <p>Can you describe the activities of a spin doctor? Lots of former political PRs and political journalists have described the tactics used within their autobiographies, give list. Which of these tactics have you experienced first hand? How commonly are these tactics used by political PRs within government in your opinion? Do you know of any government or parliamentary documents detailing tactics to be used when working with the media? Are there any techniques you consider unethical?</p>

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
E & F	<p><u>Impacts on journalists</u> What groups do you see as having an impact on deciding what is news? How do you decide whether to go to Political Journalists or specialists?</p> <p><u>Issues</u> What percentage of your day would you consider to be spent dealing with the media? How much of this work is actually published? How much of your position involves keeping information out of the media?</p> <p><u>Information subsidies</u> How often do you speak to political journalists? What percentage of your discussions with political journalists are on the record? How much information given by political PRs is used by political journalists? How much information do you give to political journalists on a day-to-day basis?</p> <p><u>Who is gatekeeper</u> Would you describe your role as a gatekeeper of political information Who do you feel is most powerful in ensuring a piece of information becomes news? How often do stories you have influenced appear in the press?</p>	<p><u>Impacts on journalists</u> What percentage of your day-to-day work is actually published?</p> <p><u>Information subsidies</u> How often do you speak to political PRs? How much information do you get from political PRs? What percentage of that information do you actually use?</p> <p><u>Who is gatekeeper</u> Would you describe your role as a gatekeeper of political information? Who do you feel is most powerful in ensuring a piece of information becomes news? Do you ever use your articles to try to influence political PRs?</p> <p><u>Access</u> When covering a story, in what order would you generally approach sources for a comment? What groups do you see as having an impact on deciding what is news?</p>	<p><u>Impacts on journalists</u> Which groups do you see as having an impact on deciding what is news?</p> <p><u>Information subsidies</u> What percentage of your discussions with political journalists are on the record? How much information do you think political journalists in general take from political PRs?</p> <p><u>Who is gatekeeper</u> Would you consider journalists or political PRs to be the gatekeepers of political news information? Who do you feel is most powerful in ensuring a piece of information becomes news? How often do your comments appear in the press, split between local and national and broadcast ?</p> <p><u>Access</u> What groups do you see as having the most access to the news agenda?</p>

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
G	<p><u>Organisational</u> Who do you believe sets the news agenda</p> <p><u>Societal</u> Do you believe the media's role in society has changed since you joined the industry?</p> <p><u>Journalism</u> Are you aware of any significant changes in political journalism since you began your career?</p> <p><u>Political</u> Could you tell me your views on the changes in the political briefing system for 10 Downing Street? It has been said that there is a crisis of political communication. What are your views on this?</p> <p><u>Relationship</u> When do you feel 'spin' began? Can a particular period be seen as the 'height of spin'? Some have talked about the 'death of spin'. What are your views on this?</p> <p>Follow all questions in above section by asking for examples and if they have a reason for that change</p>	<p><u>Organisational</u> Who do you believe sets the news agenda</p> <p><u>Societal</u> Do you believe the media's role in society has changed since you joined the industry?</p> <p><u>Journalism</u> Are you aware of any significant changes in political journalism since you began your career in journalism?</p> <p><u>Political</u> Could you tell me your views on the changes in the political briefing system for 10 Downing Street? It has been said that there is a crisis of political communication. What are your views on this?</p> <p><u>Relationship</u> When do you feel 'spin' began? Can a particular period be seen as the 'height of spin'? Some have talked about the 'death of spin'. What are your views on this?</p> <p>Follow all questions in above section by asking for examples and if they have a reason for that change</p>	<p><u>Organisational</u> Who do you believe sets the news agenda</p> <p><u>Societal</u> Do you believe the media's role in society has changed since you joined Parliament?</p> <p><u>Journalism</u> Are you aware of any significant changes in political journalism since you entered Parliament?</p> <p><u>Political</u> Could you tell me your views on the changes in the political briefing system for 10 Downing Street? It has been said that there is a crisis of political communication. What are your views on this?</p> <p><u>Relationship</u> When do you feel 'spin' began? Can a particular period be seen as the 'height of spin'? Some have talked about the 'death of spin'. What are your views on this?</p> <p>Follow all questions in above section by asking for examples and if they have a reason for that change</p>

Area of info	Questions to political PRs	Questions to political journalists	Questions to politicians
Extra	<p>To whom are you responsible when carrying out your job?</p> <p>To whom do you feel journalists are responsible when carrying out their job?</p> <p>Do you feel journalists are obliged to act as a 'watchdogs' on the government?</p> <p>Follow up on the answers</p>	<p>To whom do you feel responsible when you report?</p> <p>To whom do you feel political PRs are responsible?</p> <p>Do you feel your position as a journalist obliges you to act as a 'watchdog' on the government?</p> <p>Follow up on the answers</p>	<p>To whom do you feel journalists are responsible when carrying out their job?</p> <p>To whom do you feel political PRs are responsible?</p> <p>To whom are politicians responsible?</p> <p>Do you feel journalists are obliged to act as a 'watchdogs' on the government?</p> <p>Follow up on the answers</p>

APPENDIX TWO – SPECIAL ADVISOR INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**A2.1 Interviewee SA1**

Date: Wednesday August 27, 2003

Place: The Rockwell, in the Trafalgar Square Hilton hotel.

How would you describe the changes in political communications since you joined the government?

Not that different. Always been bad. Always been characterised by suspicion and mutual distrust. They each want something from each other. Politicians want to get their stuff out, either events or policies, political or personal and politicians realise they can't reach the public without going through the media but they would love to if they could but no-one will go to public meetings etc. Journalist's motives are more mixed. They say they want to get news and truth into their papers but this is only pretence. Papers want stories which will put bums on seats which will get coverage and referred to by their rivals. They want to get attention so each journalist must get into that cause. The phrased sexed-up came from Gilligan and the BBC – civil servants would never use the phrase sexed up. It is a journalist word not a government word. Journalists just want to get in their paper. Sometimes journalists and politician's motives coincide when we have a good story but it is rare. At its worst we pitch stories in which we know they will misrepresent it so we try our best to steer it. An example is the Edinburgh television festival last weekend. With the Hutton enquiry going on all the press were gagging for a hint that Tessa Jowell was clashing with the BBC so the main objective of her speech was to get a Q&A and speech without giving this hint. It could have gone either way (giving into the BBC) so had to find a strip of land between the two. So we had to make it very bland. We told the press there would be no hints in the speech so would be no news. We came up with the idea of introducing the speech with clips of the kind of TV that she likes. So we made the main piece of the speech about repeats (which the press love to talk about) and how classic, good repeats should be shown more. The newspapers are suckers for this. They love pieces of trivia and we got masses of coverage. At least half a dozen pieces. It was a slow weekend so they took the stories straight from our speech and release. Other columnists commented on it without even hearing it or reading it. Zoe Williams had to fill up her column so did this. We (press and spin doctors) play games with each other. We put out stuff we know is bollocks and they write stuff they know is bollocks. Newspapers have their own agenda and have own world view. The FT is the only one which doesn't editorialise. We call it spin. They call it editorialising. They used to split editorial and news coverage but not any more. The Guardian always been this but the others do not. You can work out what a piece will be by the byline. The Times was not like this 20 years ago. The Independent decides its market in passionate liberalism, green left and now it is the most directly biased, they are working on giving papers character. When it began it was too boring. Then began moving into the tabloid territory. Not just inventing stories but selecting specific stories. The government want good NHS stories to go in and whilst in a day there might be three good stories, one negative and one cure of cancer story, it will be the negative story that the Mail puts on the front page, and the cure of cancer one which they put into the features section. The Mail puts all the negative stories in the news section and the positive stories in the features. The news pages hark back to the past and the features go to the future. The Guardian harks forward to a utopia if only the Government listened to them. With the Mail, any new stuff that comes out they go against. They are against gays etc. The Telegraph. Not as obsessive as the Mail. Mail has always been opinionated. Telegraph has a much better separation between news and opinion.

Does this effect the way you speak to and deal with them?

Yes. The Mail is very professionally done. The only paper which is done better is the Sun. The Sun's agenda is for markets, liberation and optimistic rights. Want to be cheered up. Not ashamed of the fun stuff in the paper. It is a really optimistic paper. It has a strong agenda. Will look for

quotes, go through bins etc. Good very clear view about it is markets agenda. Will put essential stories in the papers and the rest is entertainment and pieces are all short. We treat every newspaper differently. We think of individual journalists who might be interested. We think of the downside to giving every story. Even within one paper two journalists will treat the same story very differently. They are not homogenous. We will work out what the agendas are (this does not require brain power). They vary to the extent but of much more interested in getting a story right. Like Hutton, why are number ten so angry about Gilligan's piece? Because he was behaving like a newspaper journalist not like a BBC journalist. The BBC just said the story was justified – they have not said it was the truth. But that they we told it by a source. The US media are much better at going with two sources. In the UK papers do this all the time going with only one source. But you expect better of the BBC. FT is least worst paper and followed the communications bill very closely. They ran two or three stories which weren't quite right but they had an insider who was obviously giving them information. We tracked down the two people it could have been and reworked the working group so these two were not in it. The FT still continued to get some stories which were wrong. One of these I actually had to go to the editor and complain. Another story said we would be going down route A. We were never planning on doing this but when a few weeks later we came out stating we were on route B the FT journalist claimed we had made a u-turn. Journalists, if they have a source for their story, will say maybe it was not true – but it was justified. They will also jazz up other things like "senior Labour MP" which could just mean they were an older MP or just been there for more than four years! A journalist could go on the news and say the 'knives are out for Hoon' and yet it could have just come from one old MP on his 19th pint in Strangers Bar. That is why we have so much trouble with the press. They have their own agendas and do not care enough about the truth. They just care about justifying the story. They will say the 'story is too good to check'. Andrew Neil actually said this at the Hutton enquiry. Most of it is gossip. And many of the gossip pieces will end up being wrong – at least three out of 10 of them is wrong. With the FT journalist on the Communications Bill, she changed stories to cover herself.

Has this changed how you treat her?

Yes. I now treat her very differently. I can't trust her any more. I can't trust any of them so I assume the worst. I don't trust [journalist] but I knew I could trust him enough to give him information on the negatives of the Olympics without him saying that it came from the [department]. This was the only way we could get both sides of the argument out there. If we gave both out to all they would say the [department] are anti-sport. We had to do it to get some balance to the discussion. We gave him the story but with the threat that if the source was revealed they would not get a story again. Cannot trust them but on something like this I do not think he would out me. I do not trust any journalist – none at all. There is a scale of trust. Some I cannot even speak to but others up the scale there will be a straightforward trade off. Some stories all journalists would kill their granny to get a story. Most Mail journalists are right at the bottom but there are some journalists who are meticulous. Some, a handful of them you can give background off the record briefings to but not most of them. Lots of trouble from some but many have been caught out by being too trusting or too manipulative. Our motives are not as pure as driven snow but they are different. Must be done very cautiously and one must be suspicious as to their motives. To get our story out there we need to put it in the best possible light for that individual or for the government, party, group in party or government (whether it is issue, regional, new labour, old labour) We want the best possible gloss and some times this is a perfectly proper thing to do. Lies should always be wrong but should not do things out of context. We have given statements which were literal truths but they were true. We said that we would be adding £6 billion a year for three years to the NHS budget – so we stated that we were giving £36 billion to the NHS. It was in our own interest as a trying to get elected but it was bad in that it raised expectations of the NHS and then people did not believe us as things weren't getting better. Morally we should not take that kind of risk but it's also not in our interest to raise expectations. The papers have a nasty shifty short memory which we seek to exploit and not only are our motives murky but so are some of our techniques. If you see their myths you can become unstuck. So most have very careful limits of it. Because papers do not have to consistent but ministers do. Ministers speeches can be considered out of context so we have a penalty in the future for anything we say. The papers don't. So we

have to err on the side of being safe and cautious. An example was with the Olympics. Sports journalists only wanted to write positive stories. But if we gave out two sides to the story then they would class it as a split. This means policy cannot be discussed, only personalities.

Anything which stands out as being done well?

The positive coverage of the Euro decision was very rare with no leaking and covered very well. It was good because they had lots of independent people to say what they thought. If papers can write split they will – this means we can't do anything which will put this into their hands.

How do you think it works in the big picture? Does it affect democracy?

It does matter. The difference between truth and speculation and the difference between scepticism and cynicism and the difference between the real world and other world are creations of the media and politics. Most people are mature enough to understand that and I think what politicians need to do is to play into scepticism to get people to understand what the real world is like even who most in media world will be speculation and cynical. We should say what we mean anyway. We must be incredibly cautious: in languages and timing of when we hand things into the public arena but different in adapting to our behaviour. Because that's what's important they need and behaving like them (the papers) some ministers will call journalists on their own or send the newspapers stories without checking with their departments simply to get a cheap headline. They cannot resist it. I left the BBC to work for the Prime Minister. Tony isn't like that. Has view is not to talk to the papers but to find the best thing you can tell them. But some ministers are constantly talking to journalists on a cheap headline basis. Some will always do that but it is part of the problem. We won't get an understanding of the Hutton outcome for about a year but will start to get a sense of its implications once things have settled next summer.

A2.2 Interviewee SA2

Date: Wednesday October 1, 2003

Place: In the Breez and Klutz bar, Brighton over lunch.

When I arrived the interviewee and [journalist] of the [newspaper] were discussing the interviewees column for the [newspaper] the next day. The interviewee said "Who do we hate, who shall we stitch up?" They picked Geoff Hoon and wrote a diary section stating that the "beleaguered Defence Secretary Buff Hoon's speech to the conference had underwhelmed delegates and that according to his sources he would be out of a job shortly." The speech had not yet taken place, no advance copies were available and he later admitted to me that he never even watched the speech afterwards. His source was a junior minister who he'd played golf with that morning and would have no idea on Blair's cabinet reshuffle plans.

How do you think spin doctoring has changed since you left [department]?

Not changed much at all since left. The only way to influence journalists is to spend as much time as possible with journalists. And by knowing what the story is for the next day. You are failing in your job if you do not spot it early. Trying to kill stuff is a million times harder.

How often did you speak to journalists?

Journalists are like lions, if you do not feed them, they feed up on you. So it is good to fill them up on a constant feed of stories. If you do not provide stories then they make them up. Spoke to all of them daily.

Do you ever refuse to speak to any journalists?

Sometimes goes and some blanked but not a good idea because if not speaking you are not communicating.

What was the split like between you and the press officers?

They did the shit stuff and I did the glamour job. I never wrote a press release when I was there. The official press officer was useless. They did not have daily newspapers or even mobile phones but it is much better now. All learnt from New Labour. The irony is civil servants had prepared for New Labour very well but not in the area of communications which was seen as a complete joke by journalists.

How long did it take to sort it out?

[Department] had to get rid of a lot. Other departments were dreadful. Alistair Campbell did not get on with many and so sacked them because they worked for Tories but because they were useless. Head of the Press for the [department] and the Government Information System did not even know their official title. I had no power over the civil servants but they worked to my instructions. I was in with [minister] every morning and they were not so they knew I had his backing but a normal special advisor may not do that.

Did you do any policy stuff?

Yes. Of course.

How much power did you have?

Journalists did not want to upset me because then their sources dry up. Special relations still happen. When working it was human. Now media more critical. Tony Blair attacked media in his speech which is completely bonkers. The reason media turned against Tony Blair is because he is a lying bastard.

Should the media become the opposition is the official opposition are not effective?

If there is no opposition that is great. My job is to make [minister] and government look great.

Do you have a problem being called a spin doctor?

I am proud to be a spin doctor. Spinning is in my blood. Much happier not to read newspapers cannot take any too seriously.

Did you trust journalists?

Never trust a journalist. They have a job to do. Their job is to get you and they will treat you hard when they find something. Unwritten code and Number 10 broken code. Never mislead the lobby. Tom Kelly did this but his job was not to mislead - that is his job.

Did they trust you?

I had a code I would never lie but sometimes you can be economical with the truth. The Bank of England story. We kept it secret because of the markets and leaking was a problem. Did not tell the press office as they leaked. I never wrote anything down as a spin doctor or used any email. All done by word of mouth. [Minister] knows I'm a bit wild but will do business and I just need to be reigned in.

A2.3 Interviewee SA3

Date: Thursday October 9, 2003

Place: Interviewees office at the Press Complaints Commission

I am interested in your views as an outsider looking into the media arena on the press and their relationships with politicians and special advisors. Would you mind telling me some of your background?

I was special advisor to John Wakeham when he was energy minister. I started off in the Conservative research department in the early 80s and worked for John Wakeham when he became Secretary of State for Energy in 1989. I was with him for three years. I then went to Lowe Bell Good Relations, part of the Chime network. I came to the Press Complaints Commission in 1995.

How have things changed since you became a special advisor?

It has changed beyond all recognition. There are two aspects to it. First in sheer volume of special advisors which are now about. Until 1997 there would be only one special advisor in each government department except in the Foreign Office or Treasury and a large proportion were outside experts and only some were political appointees. There were far more experts and they influenced rather than party influence. Secondly the role of the special advisor was to act as a dumping ground for civil servants when it was getting too political. If something was obvious PR for the minister themselves, or a speech or was political and party liaison and was not domain of the civil servants and they loved being able to pass things on! It was a symbiotic relationship. special advisors were a buffer between Whitehall and Parliament. I had a high view of the civil servants I worked with. Now there are many more special advisors. There is an arrogation to them of many more policy making responsibilities and now much more media handling. Now a media job which has led to the domination of the Government Information Service. I would never have put forward public profiles of my minister. Then there were many more press officers – we had at least 70 in the [Department] and their role has been undermined. It has changed dramatically and not for the better.

How has it damaged things?

In the civil service it has. We need an apolitical civil service. Special advisors relationships' with civil servants are strained. The heads of information have been appointed through a political process. Policy does not now stem from specialists but from how it is presented and this is not good for public life. The main problem is for the civil service. Civil Servants would welcome a constitutional safeguard on impartiality.

What is the level of complaints surrounding political issues or from political people?

Quite a small number. Most are local people with issues with their local newspaper. We get three types of complaints in this way. The first, a good number of complaints, stem from local councillors complaining from a dispute with local newspapers. Then we get national politicians who make formal complaints. We get about 15-20 a year because politicians do not like complaining about the press and because often sorted out first before getting to the formal process. Most are about accuracy. Finally there are privacy of family complaints and this gets politicians more excited than anything. Good number of complaints each year about intrusion. Most are calls requesting informal advice on how to deal with press. It is mostly people wanting advice on how to deal with it. We tell them how to approach newspapers etc.

As you cannot deal with formal complaints anonymously I imagine you do not get any about sourcing?

Well Charles Clarke complained about a report in the Times which he said was inaccurate. He was quoted but had not said what it said. We suggested it could be solved through the letters pages, where many issues are resolved but he wanted blood so we had to discount the complaint. We can't help on opinions – only facts.

What do you see as the differences between special advisors and civil servants?

When I was a special advisor there was no merging of the roles. It was not an issue. Partly because they were specialists and had no impetus to step on the toes of civil servants and it was only one person so they got less involved. Now we had the Labour Party opposition media machine put into government without changing it. In Wilson's government special advisors came in and in his book he says what a special advisor should be. The Labour Party saw the Whitehall machine as its enemy and they wanted to colonise it and when the Tories get back in, in 15 years they will do it as well over again. A Civil Service Act should empower civil servants to be able to say no to something and give impartiality to the Government Information Service.

A2.4 Interviewee SA4

Date: Wednesday July 9, 2003

Place: House of Lords office

Can you tell me something about your background in politics and journalism?

It is thirty years since I was a special advisor in 1974. I was a special advisor in the Department of the Environment, the Foreign Office and then worked (but not with the media) at Number 10. I ran the 1979 election campaign and then went into political journalism.

What has most changed?

There is a 24 hour news cycle now and there has been a huge increase in news outlets. When I was working as a special advisor my ministers would only do one or two interviews a month. Now, for each announcement the minister would be expected to do seven or eight.

How did you decide who stories would go to?

The decline of specialist journalists is a big factor. Now most stories go to political journalists. Anything with a political slant is given to the lobby.

Why?

It is more economic for the papers and wanting clash stories. That has been a huge change. Especially with the number of correspondents. They understand lobby but they do not know how the specialist journalists are. There has been a change in the perception by politicians who believe party advancement and winning elections is through talking to political journalists rather than designing policies. There are far more special advisors now. There were 20 or 30 in the 1974 government, which was the first time they existed. Now there are 82. Many of whom are media specialists. They never had media specialists in 1974. Spinning was not considered to be part of the job. They were fairly careful. They seem now to be less careful and more of them come from a professional background which promotes that. There has been an accumulation of small quantitative changes which have accounted to qualitative changes. In 1974 they still did briefings but the quantity was very different. Peter Mandelson was first great breakthrough – no-one else came near that. The Prime Minister always had effective press officers but Peter Mandelson professionalised it. The Labour Party had a man called Percy Clarke and one assistant, maybe two.

But that was it. This was very different to now. Now they even have daily briefings from the party. The whole area has become professionalised. In 1974 getting to end of but still in an era where it was about class and only a small number of voters ever changed their minds about who they would vote for so politics was an insiders game. There were much stronger party allegiances then and not to do with class. There are far more voters up for grabs now than there were then. People are now more used to having messages thrown at them and to win elections you must do this too.

Which spin doctors do you admire?

I can't answer that as I stopped working as a political journalist in 1999.

What are your views on the day to day relationships between spin doctors and political journalists?

At the economist had own measure of first hand contact, operated more with the politicians themselves than with spinners. When at the Sunday Times I was entirely dependent on spinners. Bernard Ingham giving one a hand was an important part of the trade. The Treasury already have very good press people.

What was the relationship between special advisors and the civil service press people?

Very close and very good when I was at the Department for the Environment. We worked extremely closely together. I was good at putting the party political points of view forward. And we had a division of labour. We had a close day to day relationship and were useful to each other. Could predict how each other would work and think. Today's relationships are much more varied and quality and some civil servants don't have high regard for the spinners and vice versa.

What are your views on the idea of the gatekeeper in this situation?

Don't know if this has changed much. What has changed is that now there is much more analysis of where journalists coming from. I would give briefings to people who were better informed. But then the media pressure on good was much less great. I don't recall punishing anyone for writing a bad story.

Who do you think sets the news agenda?

Newspapers. Most of what we say is an attempt to divert the news river while stories became fashionable from which to work but not terribly successful. Government is more a victim than it is in control. The power to control the news agenda is hugely exaggerated.

Do you trust spin doctors?

If call them spin doctors you should not. "Was not consciously trying to deceive people. Was trying to give analysis of how it were that was not in any way misleading." He added to the truth – not detracted from it. Some used other tactics and this was less useful.

What is your image of today's spin doctor?

Political communications is an integrated profession. Lots of different things done by lots of different people. When I was a special advisor we spent only about 20 per cent of our time dealing with media issues – now I imagine it is up to 80%. In our time there was no such person who only did media work.

At the Sunday Times, how often did you speak to them?

Only when filling in.

What effect do you think these changes have had on journalism's role in democracy and as the fourth estate?

The nature of modern journalism has become exceptionally powerful but at the same time they pretend to be the opposition. Spin doctoring was an attempt to contain what was perceived as taking power without them having to work for it. Worked very early on in the New Labour government but not working now. Journalism is out of hand now.

A2.5 Interviewee SA5

Date: Monday November 10, 2003

Place: Corridor of the interviewees office building

How do you see the relationship between politicians, special advisors and journalists?

Nothing is new. Presentation is not new. In a Daily Mail article in 1974 they listed the men who really run Britain. It is not a new story. There are myths on the industry which are alarming and disarming. There is so much ignorance in the press about special advisors it is depressing. The main myth is that we are an agency above our principles. That we have more power than our principals which we do not have. No-one could think special advisors would say anything that their bosses do not want them to say. Are all these people really deciding policy? No. But special advisors do have a number of roles.

How much of your role is working on the media?

None. None now but I was a press officer for 18 years before this. But it was all reactive. I was on call seven days a week and was called all the time. I'd get calls at midnight on Saturday night asking why another paper has a story and not them. John Prescott does not like talking to the press but I still have a strong relationship with the media as I had done so much in the leader of the house's office. The first myth is that we changed things in 1997, that we politicised civil servants. In the leader of the house's office before I got there they did not have a real press office – all media work was done by the special advisor. Then when many of the Heads of Government Information Service's went we did not push them out – in many cases it was a question of their own incompetence. Maybe we were too strong but they had not moved with the times. They acted as they always had done but we had revolutionised things in opposition. We had an intranet and instant email to each other in opposition. When I joined as a special advisor I did not even have a computer. And even when I finally got one it wasn't until 1999 that I got email. In the Leader of the House's office they used to have to get drafts faxed to them, changes made on the faxes and then the whole document retyped. Often we were there on a Wednesday till after midnight. It wasn't about spin, it was about the speed of communications. We were very understaffed and we were used to dealing with being much quicker. An example is with Andy Wood and Stephen Byers in the Autumn of 1997. It was the drugs tsar and I was on the appointments committee and we had a press conference and because of Andy Wood stuff and I worked with them and I did the political briefing. There was no sense of urgency with the civil service press officers. There was a mismatch of professionalism. There is an old deal between special advisors and press which was that we will help you, going you quotes and information and getting ministers onto programmes and giving you speeches in advance in return for keeping our names out of the media. Charlie Wheelan stepped outside the boundaries a little bit but not too far. The crap that gets written about us. If those that write crap about us now call then I tell them to call the press officers. Journalists all see special advisors as professionals. They don't spin (which I class as exaggerating or telling untruths) but because one journalists says we do, they all then say that. There are legions of examples of media spin. The Bernie Ecclestone case for example. The only mistake in that was giving the money back. Frank Dobson had already said that in certain sports which relied heavily on Tobacco advertising the law would be phased in. In highlighting this and over emphasising it looked like we had changed the plan. The opt out was always there. Instead we looked bad and

lost £1 million. Another example of this was a story in March 2001 by news editors of the Independent on Sunday. The story was about special advisors getting a pay off of six months before the election. They only read some of the rules though and missed the bit about them having to pay back the money if Labour got re-elected and they got their jobs back. So I rang up the news editor and I asked him where he had got it from. The source was a permanent secretary and he had not got it down right. It reinforced their readers thoughts that we are scum. I think our relationship with media is pretty good. The difference is between political journalists and the other journalists who do not understand us. The Wicks committee takes evidence from people like Nick Jones and Andrew Rawnsley who all make money out of slagging off special advisors. An example of this is John Prescott and the stories about him getting another new Jag and having its security features put on by the government. Prescott is entitled to an armoured car as one of the five cabinet ministers (PM, Deputy PM, Northern Ireland, Defence, Foreign Secretary) but this bit was never mentioned in the papers. Privately many political journalists admit that they find the media attacks on the special advisors awful and unfair and the Daily Mail and the Guardian are the worst at this. I have a lot of friends who are journalists.

But in the current climate where there doesn't seem to be an effective opposition from within the parliamentary parties do we not need the media to act as an opposition?

It is not the job of the media to be the opposition. It is their job to report that the political opposition are not effective. They seem out to get us even without reason. When the British government organised a trip to Bali to sort out some problems before a large world convention, Sarah Montague on the Today programme did a two way with the reporter and started by asking whether this was just a junket. He replied that it did not seem to be and that a lot of hard work was going on. She finished the piece by signing off that 'well it seems like a junket to me.' This type of editorialising should not be allowed. There are other examples of Sky anchors reading a document and only using the half of it that makes a story ignoring the balancing side. They did this with a Brown and Prescott split story on the fire strikes.

Do you do anything when this happens?

It's pointless. You try but...I am chair of my local CLP and the Guardian ran a story saying Brigit Prentice would be deselected. It was not true but someone who wanted it to be true happened to live with the brother of Patrick Wintour who wrote the piece. I rang Patrick and said that it was a bad story. He said he knew there was no chance of her being deselected. So I asked why it was on the front page. He said he had written an editorial against it but it would not be printed. The media myth is that we are wicked horrible people who bully civil servants but to be fair to press government position has been reprehensible. With Drapergate there were three things: one that he leaked a select committee report, two that Draper promised influence to the 17 most powerful people and three that Roger Liddle had promised special favours. On the Monday after the story broke I rang the secretary of the DTI committee and asked for list of people assigned to the report. A person at GJW gave it to a member of the press and gave it to Hencke in the Lobby and wrote it and it did not appear so handed it back. They had their thesis and they were going to keep it. Press Officers have a professional information role with the media but that is not the story they want. Special advisors have access to the minister. There have always been special advisors.

But are there not more media advisors now?

No. There have always been generalist special advisors. And we do have specialists. Out of 81 special advisors there are only 11 who deal with media but it is hard to separate them out. No private secretaries are specialists and nor are ministers but they pick it up as they go along. We are appendages to ministers so when there are demands to make special advisors separate they are sowing the seeds of destruction. Some ministers do not reign in their special adviser and that is where the problems are, such as with Charlie Wheelan and Jo Moore but that is the problem of the minister. All the other special advisors get on fine. We have relationship with many civil servants and media members. Our role is as a fire wall. We have one warm side to keep the rest of the civil

service politically clear and I think we do a pretty good job. Without us there would be no separation of what was political or not.

Are there any problems of separation between special advisors and civil servants?

Not at all and there never have been. Before New Labour came in they were doing a different job. They had not caught up with the modern media. If you are a large monolithic organisation why should you respond to the media. We acted the way we did because of the way we were treated by Kinnock. It is harder now than when we were in opposition because there are too many people and we need to spend the time to run the country. There is too much to do running government for us to be able to say 'this week we are doing crime'. I would rather be busy and in charge than setting the agenda. Peter Mandelson is a genius. His problem is he doesn't understand when he is in jeopardy and he doesn't have enough people watching his back. Campbell is the closest thing you get to a genius. Alistair Campbell is still my hero. The difference Blair made was amazing. RoboBlairite. In general I get on fine with the press officers – but now lots of them come to me for advice. I am the secretary of the FDA trade union branch and in GIS handbook it says that they cannot be political. This is a contradiction because as long as we are not being horrible about people we can do what we want. You can introduce party political content more than civil servants can. First person in a crisis is the special advisor. If a special advisor did not exist you would have to invent them. There has to be a way for ministers to sound off without worrying. There is a saying that three people could walk directly into a ministers office: The private secretary, personal secretary and the special advisor. Only one person could walk into their hotel room, the special advisor.

A2.6 Interviewee SA6

Date: Tuesday July 8, 2003

Place: In a meeting room in the interviewees department

How did you get your job working for [minister]?

I started working for the [think tank] when think tanks were starting to regain some of their power and importance which they had lost directly after the 1997 election. During my time there the organisation trebled in size and I got to know [minister] very well as she was a trustee of the [think tank]. She took interest in the press side of the work they were doing. I began to give her press advice when she was a junior minister as junior ministers rarely get official help and when she was given her current position he was invited to work for her.

How do you see the big picture relationship between special advisors and the media?

This depends on how it works. We have a specific set up where I just do press. I am [ministers] press officer. Political journalists trust me as someone close to [minister]. A lot of it is down to proximity. It is important for political journalists that they are speaking to someone who is close to their minister. However they must be careful not to abuse that role. [Minister] has a civil service press officer and a media relations special advisor.

How do you split the work?

I get involved when something needs more weight and credibility. We both have the job of protecting and promoting [minister]. The strict definition is that I am the sole person allowed to do party political stuff. I am the only person who does that. I also do the longer term thinking, give the media the bigger picture and also give [minister] some policy advice.

Can you give me an example?

As well as Secretary of State for [department], [minister] is also the minister for women. We recently had to announce the policies on same sex relationships and on age discrimination. I advised her to relate these issues more to her [department] brief than her [other] brief – taking the gender argument and putting it the bigger picture of her [department] brief as this would work better strategically.

What is the day to day relationship like with the media?

Good. They phone quite a lot. Always have journalists who are more disposed to what you are doing. Will talk to two or three journalists a day. Now talking to a lot more to leader writers and feature writers – people who don't automatically get spoken to.

Are the media getting more powerful?

The media are spinning as much as the government is meant to be. The media take a position and make it what they want it to be and then this position becomes common currency. Once it is written it is assumed – without it having any basis at all. Recently [minister] gave an interview to the Telegraph and mentioned something related to Blair's Young Britton speech a few years ago. Her statement was in contrast to this and it was picked up upon and made into a major story. The spin in this case came from the journalist and this happens all the time.

Do you trust political journalists?

Some of them. Political journalists find it very hard not to focus on personalities. There are some very talented, clever, thoughtful ones but these are in the minority. They can be trusted but there are only two or three.

Would you name them?

No. Their problem is not going into detail of policy. All papers have a policy advisor as well so they look at political reporting. They over hype and over ramp things up. Political Editors have a lot of weight in newspapers so personalities get over emphasised in newspapers.

How do you decide which journalists to go to?

Will go through and using the following criteria work out the best person to approach. Firstly, how far up they will place it in the paper, then how favourably they will write the story, what the journalist's agenda is: pro business, pro unions, personality splits and then what the paper's take would be. These change for each issue. Some obviously work better in the FT or Guardian. Some have specific campaigns running which match a story. This is all calculated in his head. The [department] has a list of journalists which includes the usual suspects and the business editors. I also have my own list with the usual suspects and political editors I feel I can trust. Some journalists have their own political agenda and follow some.

Do you treat broadcast and print journalists any differently?

Yes. Broadcasters are in a more politically neutral position but often lead by who will give them the most incendiary quote of the day.

One way of describing different roles of press officers and special advisors is to say that press officers work is above the line (the day to day press release writing etc) and that the special advisor works below the line (briefing, kite flying, giving exclusives etc) Do you believe this to be the case?

There should not be a line. The government produces pure information and this should be presented in the purest way. This doesn't work, as the role of this job is to make the story interesting. The government is charged with delivering the Labour Party Manifesto. All have same political task and it is about how you do that most effectively. It means a good press officer must be: well networked, know the journalists they feed information too: they should read their stuff and get to know the type of person they are, have the confidence of the person they are working for and know the issues and get engaged with the policy. We have a 24-hour savvy media which will pick up everything. Some stuff needs gloss as the job of the press officer to make it interesting. Some class this as spinning it but it is just them doing their job. Where it is spin is where you take it too far, away from the message or get too clever. Above and below the line is an old fashioned way of seeing it. Special advisors are brought in because civil servants usually very bad at that. This is why they have brought in outside press officers (such as union press officers). The fact of the matter is there are special advisors who over spin and cause all types of problems but if I did not work so closely with the press officers I could not do my job.

How do you describe your job to people outside of politics?

As one of [ministers] people. Every cabinet minister has people.

APPENDIX THREE – PARTY COMMUNICATOR INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

A3.1 Interviewee PC1

Date: Wednesday July 2, 2003

Place: Zuccato cafe, Bow Lane, London

What are your views on the relationship between spin doctors and political journalists?

It is important to have a good relationship. Both groups are in it together. Proximity makes it a lot easier but it is essential that you get along and this relationship makes them dependent that you do well. It is a sort of client relationship. But I got all this experience whilst working for the party leader however so this is different than working for other groups. Basically as a spin doctor you have a spectrum of journalists which you work with. Some will be very close and you will tell them almost everything and use them to plant stories. Other journalists, such as those with the tabloids were not so close because they were not so interested and gave very little space to the Lib Dems. Despite this, spin doctors and political journalists live in and out of each others pockets. It takes two years to get to know the scene and to be accepted by the lobby correspondents. The lobby is a club and expect a certain amount of deference. I never went into the tactic of bullying journalists though I obviously had my favourite journalists that I would go to and would give them better treatment.

Did you treat print and broadcast journalists any differently?

Broadcast is a different world to print, partly because the numbers of people involved mushroomed. There are so many people involved in the broadcast production of news that it is much harder to get a handle of what they are doing. With the press you know someone is on your specific beat so you can build the relationship with them. This is much harder in the broadcast sector and they become harder to target.

Do you trust political journalists?

I learnt to after a while. There is an unwritten code about how they treat you. You learn what the penalties are.

Did the political journalists trust you?

Political journalists trusted [party leader] and they knew I never knowingly mucked them about. This was important. They also knew that I knew what [party leader] was thinking about everything – often before [party leader] did!

What are your views on journalists as professionals?

Journalists are under so much pressure now. The increased media competition and the amount of media cutbacks mean that journalists are constantly trying to find their own stories and also having to write more copy.

When did this change?

Whilst I was there. It was due to 24 hour news being broadcast. If news junkies can see news on a rolling basis then they already know what will be in the papers before they are published. This means journalists constantly have to strive to find newer and newer stories. So to fill this gap they end up making the news themselves. An example of this is the BBC and Campbell.

What tactics were used?

Used pre-briefing on stories – this worked because the lobby press tend to take a collective view on things and this is his critique of the press – that they are a pack and they are afraid to disagree with all the others. [Party leader] launched a book and in was imperative that the book was well received. He made sure that this happened by getting it a positive review within the Times and all the other reviewers followed this review ensuring it was well received all over. We set the trend early on by being in control of the story. As long as The Guardian and the Independent (Riddle and Stephens) had the right story then we knew we were 80% there. At election times we saw [party leaders] rating rise because of the fair balance coverage issue. This was because the broadcast media needed good pictures and stories and elections gave this. The papers then followed the trend.

What are your views on the professionalisation of spin doctors?

Spin doctors have got a lot more professional. Partly because every professional has and partly because demands from the media are so much more. In the 1950's drunken lunches were as much as media relationships got to. Today's leaders need to be much more aware of the media and accept that it is part of their job. Spin doctors have get a lot more sophisticated. We learnt a lot from the Labour Party and this was good for everybody. The Labour Party went over the top with their attempts to bully the media (but they did this because they were exercising the ghost of how they were treated whilst Kinnock was leader) and it was counterproductive. The media however have now got too obsessed with the process rather than the substance.

What are your views on the modern gatekeeper?

Both spin doctors and political journalists have a shared agenda and this can become self-fulfilling. One of the sad things is that journalists have been too ready to play along with what the parties have wanted. Parties have got more disciplined and professional about their communications but journalists seem to accept whatever they are telling them which makes some spin doctors think there are more important then they are. However it is still the case that who is running the communication for a party is very important. The Westminster lobby have a certain wisdom about things and this is hard to challenge. One of strange things is the relationship between the Westminster journalists and the specialist correspondents. It is easier to give most stories to Westminster journalists as they don't have time to check the facts, and they do not have the in-depth knowledge of specific stories. But sometimes we would give a story to the specialists if we knew it was a strong story – especially for economics and education.

Have you seen any changes in the relationship?

Now understanding the media is a very important trait. [Party leader] was very interested and understood the media and realised it was an important part of his job. New Labour taught everybody that you have to have a story which explains what you are about – policies are relatively unimportant compared with the big picture. There has been a long term deterioration in the atmosphere with everything reported two or three steps along from the real story. There is over analysis, over cynical and over complexity of stories. Part of the general political atmosphere. Other business which is out of hand is phrases like "The BBC has learnt", because the media are trying to look like they have a different or inside angle.

The effect of these changes on democracy?

Makes politics more remote as it becomes more mediated. This is why we have such awful party conferences. There is now a diffusion of the media which is relatively new. The life cycle of stories is now very short and there are so many more outlets. This means it is hard to spot bigger trends.

Who controls the news agenda?

This varies a lot. Could be a huge number of people: The government or political parties could get a front page splash but there are others who are also important. As are events!

Which spin doctors do you admire?

Mandelson. He is a little genius. All spin doctors are struggling to do the same sort of job. A spin doctor is only as good as your product. Mandelson did his best work for Kinnock but this did not come out. The best spin doctors in the world could not have saved Major. Charles Wheelan did a lot of damage to the reputation of spin doctors especially when he was in a fly on the wall documentary talking about how he has lied to journalists.

Who else would be helpful to talk to?

- Charles Lewington
- Shelia Gunn
- Colin Byrne
- Julian Eccles

A3.2 Interviewee PC2

Date: August 2003

Place: Over email

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

Very and increasingly so. Look at new Labour. A massive majority but their legitimacy is questioned by the media and all hell breaks lose.

In general how would you summarise the relationship between journalists and political communicators?

Alternatively cosy and fraught, with the recent Govt vs BBC spat giving it a new edge.

What would be your description of a spin doctor?

I disregard this term, just as I do not believe that Max Clifford is a PR consultant. Just as with lawyers or accountants there are good ones and bad ones, but the few rotten apples should not spoil the whole barrel. A 'spin doctor' or political PR if they do their job properly is not different than a legal advisor. Their job is to get the politician's message out to the voter by minimising interference from others - be it editorial bias, ignorance on behalf of the journalist that may lead to mistakes, or negative comment from opponents.

Are there any techniques routinely used by political communicators which you consider unethical?

If they lie or bully, that is unethical.

Who would you consider to be the gatekeeper of political information?

It should be the politician themselves.

Who do you feel is most powerful in ensuring a piece of information becomes news?

Ideally the politician announcing the initiative, as they can make something real happen, but often it is the editor or occasionally the 'spin doctor'

Who do you believe sets the news agenda?

A constant tension between the media and the political elite

To whom do you feel journalists are responsible when carrying out their jobs?

Their editor and their proprietor

Do you feel journalists are obliged to act as a 'watchdogs' on the government?

No, but occasionally they can usefully play that role

Whilst in your position at the Labour Party did you trust political journalists?

Occasionally

What percentage of your day was spent dealing with the media?

60%

How much of your role involved keeping information out of the media?

10-15%

What percentage of your discussions with political journalists were on the record?

40%

To whom did you feel responsible?

My boss, Peter Mandelson, the shadow minister I was dealing with at the time and the Party Leader, Neil Kinnock.

A3.3 Interviewee PC3

Date: Monday July 21, 2003

Place: In a meeting room in the interviewee's offices.

What is your view on the relationship between spin doctors and political journalists?

Things have moved on a pace. Spinning has always been there. Always been there because who is in power in whatever system, you will always have courtiers around rulers. Spin Doctors and Lobby Correspondents have always been a key part. Court will revolve around key people and then will trickle down. Maybe the spinners are the court jesters. Different than dealing with public who are not desperately politically literate. In peace times and when the economy is doing well, the public are not going to be very engaged in politics. We only get engaged when we have a problem. Rest of the time the public are lazy, ill-informed and apathetic. So if a good politician wants a debate you have got to get messages across and need the media to do this and so must get someone who can get to the media. Most spin doctors come from media back grounds so understand how the media works. Most politicians do not. Politicians want to go on Today – they do not understand that they would get to more voters if they went onto Radio 2 or the independent

stations. They do this because they want to get onto the spin cycle – which is so small it revolves around Westminster, Whitehall, the Lobby and 4 Millbank and it gets obsessive. An example being the BBC story at the moment. We have lost sight of what the issue is about. Political journalists and politicians are so far out of touch with what the public think. The political journalists thrive on this closeness and find it terribly exciting. If they are lucky enough to get into this inner sanctum then they find it hard to criticise the system they are part of. The Jo Group was a joint group of party planners from the Lib Dems and Labour in collusion working on a pre-election deal to push out the Tories. They had many meetings and the Lib Dems inputted into Labour speeches. Political journalists did not even notice what was going on. That underground secret stuff is very exciting and there is not much that beats it. Access to stuff all others cannot see – this is intoxicating. Politics is like a holiday romance which goes on too long. All about flattery and ego massaging and in this atmosphere there is not much room for people to go in and see it as it is.

Is this new?

Since the Labour Party came to power the relationship between spin doctors and the lobby has been of the utmost importance because this government, more than any other, realises that they had to get the media on their side. But the media has now turned against them.

How would you describe spin?

Spin is explaining things. It is making things accessible. No-one has time to read things like government white papers – they just want to read the headlines. An elite group of people read things like white papers but no-one else would. With the explosion of the media, in size and 24 hour broadcasting, we have more access to information but less access to background. With the recent war no-one was explaining – we have gotten out of the habit of asking why. This country is so illiterate about the nature of politics. People do not connect their local lives with national politics because we pander to media and lose out on explaining.

Whose fault is this?

Media have a lack of confidence. Public Service Broadcasters have a duty to inform people if they are starting to chase ratings then they are failing all of us and failing in their duty to democracy. Only have to look at history programmes to see that there is a massive appetite for them – you do not have to ‘sex-up’ politics just have to make it relevant to people. For too long they have just been talking to each other – everyone’s to blame. Not all down to spin doctors. Spin doctors have tended to get across a message but have lost sight of the fact that they should be discussing policy and not process. There are complicit arrangements with media – they are talking to each other not the public. [Television programme] (a programme I work on) tried to break the cycle by the tone of the programme. Political journalists try to maintain their secret position. [Programme] treats politicians like human beings. Some time has gone between the deferential age of ‘is there anything else you would like to tell the nation, sir’ and the new style of attack journalism. The death of deference has gone too far. A lot of people go into politics for good reasons. All running on a hamster wheel so they deserve some respect and if good a press, and lobby press who are snipping about small things it is easier to make cheap jokes than it is to ask different questions. We all seem up to it and in doing this we have handed power to the spin doctors. They know that it is easier to give women’s stories to FeMail and if they want to get away from politics they go to Richard and Judy. It has gone too far and created a hideous, ignorant country. I have done some work with young people and democracy for the Home Office. Young People want to be treated as individuals and like people who talk to them, at their level, not down to them and at them. No-one ever explains anything. If you start to get interested in politics as a teenager then there is nothing that can start you at zero. How are you to catch up? Too much cynicism but as journalists are failing at explaining issues and public failing themselves.

Did you trust journalists when you were working for [party leader]?

Some you trust more than others because there were some who were more sympathetic. One should always be wary of relationships with media. They should not be seen as defensive or the enemy but foolish to think that you can trust anybody 100%. I trusted some journalists more than party officials because I had been a journalist and know what it was like and know how would use and not abuse it.

What tactics did you use as a spin doctor?

Tried to get people onside. We were working during the Tory sleaze time. Our problem was always trying to get coverage so had to make our news doubly interesting. Always countering the negative and trying to fight way through. It was about befriending who you know was trying to do something different, finding someone who can appreciate it more than others, like giving stories to the South West correspondent rather than the political correspondent and giving them tip offs and gossip. You have to find out who is most likely to be onside.

So is it like State of Play?

Kevin McQuire was an advisor on State of Play – was set in Guardian!

What other tactics did you use?

Giving something to a friendly journalist. Having a line ready for every occasion. They were agreed in advance, dishing the dirt on other parties, giving exclusives, leaks, tipping people off, leaving things on photocopiers.

Did you ever do this?

Couldn't possibly comment! I think the tactics are the same now as then but the methods of delivery have changed, now more is by email or text. But after the Jo Moore incident people are more wary of using this traceable technology. You choose your friends but you cover your traces. Important to keep it clean. Mostly know by 'sources close to...' etc. It is also important that you are known to be speaking for

What are your views on the change in Lobby briefings?

Made it easier for broadcasters. It does not make any difference anyway but it is cosmetic.

Who would you say are the political news gatekeepers?

Increasingly the special advisors. Then press officers but government press officers are awful because they do not have any idea how journalists work and cannot write press releases. The US system might be better because they bring in their own whole team when a new president comes in. The US are much more sophisticated at being able to deal with media. Special Advisors are the gatekeepers followed by press officers.

Who sets the news agenda?

Politicians would like to think they do. Journalists would like to think they do. In reality is somewhere in the middle. They set an agenda for themselves and not for the public.

Is there anyone else I should talk to?

Nick Jones and Amanda Platell.

A3.4 Interviewee PC4

Date: Thursday June 26, 2003

Place: Outside the GLA building

How do you approach the media?

In a straight forward approach. They know who my boss is. I have a very realistic view of the media. An example is with the congestion charge. There was no spin. It would either work or not. We are angry at the Evening Standard's attitude. We rebutted it when it was wrong. Like with the accusations of fiddling lights – it was not true. It was a constant fight for about a year. Was hard but we always knew the scheme would have to work or we would be in trouble. Evening Standard were always trying to attack us into wall. Not political journalists that were out for us but the motoring correspondents. We tried to be factual, we tried to give the public information. We managed the news, just as the journalists do it. Running other lead stories.

What sort of tactics do you use?

The usual: Pressers – in chairs, on camera and on the record. Not giving journalists room for misinterpretation. I still brief journalists myself. Some better for on paper than another. Not all stories have a press release in them. Some we will just give straight to the Guardian. The Guardian is a good newspaper. The BBC is on all the time in our office. Stories such as affordable housing or the Dome play better in some medians than others.

Do you treat print and broadcast journalists differently?

Yes. Broadcast journalists need events and strong images and some stories are just much harder to cover in broadcast terms.

Would you class yourself as a spin doctor?

Spin doctors do exist. The Labour Party had 18 years out of power. They elevated the professionalisation of communications to such an extent they have become judged by this. We do not need to use heavy handed tactics or lay down markers. We are taking some power back though. The media went along with the New Labour communications strategy but they did not like to be bullied. People do not believe now. There is a cynical media and the public are cynical too. This has damaged the industry. Despite this it is an interesting job.

What makes a good spin doctor?

Alistair Campbell is a brilliant communicator. He understands the media second to none. A bad spin doctor is someone who no-one will believe a word they say. They should be honest and straight. The BBC are turning to diversions. Blair's spin doctor needs to be close to Blair. He is much better than Mandelson. Mandelson was a politician and tactician. Campbell is a political communicator.

What are the difference between the skills needed by spin doctors and journalists?

They both need to be able to communicate, to know where a story is going to go, know what questions to ask and know where the story fits into the news agenda.

Can you think of any good examples of spin?

Yesterday. In 1997 – the fat cat campaign. It was a good area for a campaign by a used media. It was a very good media campaign.

Which political journalists do you trust?

Steve Richards. I don't like those on the Sundays who write mood music. All journalists should be more dedicated to background stories but instead they go for what is easier to write. The debate bell division is a disservice to democracy.

How do you think the changes in the media and the role and growth of spin doctors have effected democracy?

They are both damaging it. It is easier with this media to give decisions rather than details. We have had lots of trouble with this with the Congestion Charge. We had to decide whether to give stories to motoring or political correspondents. Motoring correspondents would not listen to anything positive about this story so we spoke to the political correspondents. Normally, if we want to go into specific details of stories we will talk to the specialists – if we want something to be looked at more generally and in a wider context we will give a story to the political correspondent. The same goes for the Trafalgar Square story. Motoring correspondents would automatically negative so we'd go to the arts correspondents instead. It was exactly the same in the newsroom.

Do you advise [boss] outside of your media role?

I do give some advice on policy from a communications perspective.

How do you determine when you have been successful?

The Evening Standard sees everything we do as a failure. An example is taxi fares going too high. Taxis want to reinstate extra charges. I guess success is the congestion charge. We allowed journalists into the traffic control centre. They could see it working. The broadcasters could drive the story. Success is a positive story leading the bulletin.

How is your office set up?

There are 15 press officers. They are all responsible for their own areas and specialise. We set ourselves up on a newspaper model with a meeting first thing and a 4pm meeting.

What are your views on gatekeeping in the media?

Campbell is the gatekeeper. Other than that it is still in hands of the political journalists.

A3.5 Interviewee PC5

Date: Monday June 30, 2003

Place: In a meeting room at interviewee's office.

What was your relationship like with the press when you worked for [party leader]?

It was at the time when the Tory's were in power but with a tiny majority and the Lib Democrats voted with the government on Maasterict. There were huge discussions within the Lib Dem media team on how this story was to be given to the press. During this time we had a daily morning media meeting to discuss the tactics to be used and they were considered to be very important.

What is changing?

24 hour news and the way you can give out a story. Before there was 24 hour news you would give a bit to the lunchtime news, a bit more to the 6 o'clock news and then a bit more to the 9

o'clock news. Now there are endless news bulletins with less people watching them. Spin doctors now give the whole story to the bulletin with the largest audience. But some things have stayed the same – it is still guaranteed that if you give a story to Frost on Sunday then it can dominate the bulletins on the Sunday and become front page news on the Monday as well.

Did you use press releases?

Did put out some good stories on press releases but some were very pedestrian stories which may not have been that newsworthy but as a political party they had to put that news out. The best way to work with political journalists is to get to know people in the press gallery, really well. I succeeded in this and this meant I was able to give them future or embargoed stories and would be sure they were safe from leaking or early publication. The only exception to this concerns off the record lunches. These are very high risk yet everyone still continues to do them. You watch how all journalists go to the lunch together – which is off the record and then they panic thinking one of their rivals will use a story. The other high risk activity is letting journalists into your offices for 'fly on the wall' pieces – I refused to let this happen as inevitably a junior person would say something that should not be published!

Do you trust political journalists?

Some of my best friends are political journalists! So yes, to a degree. The relationship is based on how valuable they think you are, or will be, to them in the future. But always be conscious of anything of the record. [party leader] used to give lots and lots of briefings off the record – this is noted in his diaries. Sometimes political editors actually have a lot more insider information on party issues than senior party members. This is because leaders find it easier to talk to people who understand their position and the issues involved but who are not trying to gain their job. They may be the enemy but they are not a rival for their job.

Have you seen a professionalisation of political communications?

No. I did a radio interview many years ago when I was working with Paddy Ashdown alongside Tony Benn. Tony Benn was being very unkind towards spin doctors when I pointed out that he had worked for Harold Wilson and had been chosen specifically because of his media knowledge gathered from working on Panorama. I claimed he was an original spin doctor.

Worries about the state of political communications?

I knew Alistair Campbell when he was in the lobby and he was never really a journalist – he was always a propagandist for the Labour Party. A journalist works shifts – and can switch off once they finish that shift – a spin doctor never can – they are expected to be on message 24 hours a day. A spin doctor for a political party has two audiences – paranoid backbenchers and the media. They are two very different groups which you must learn to manage. Journalists love to talk about themselves. Nick Jones is a prime example. They love to talk about the processes of politics rather than the policies or issues. An example given is when I was head of communications at [organisation] I organised a huge rally at St Martin in the Fields and Tony Blair gave a speech. Jeremy Vine turned up with a camera crew – not to cover the rally and the new announcements – but to question Blair on a recent survey which said voters did not like his smile. The policy was lost behind the process. Journalists are obsessed with process. Another example of this is the way the BBC are covering their bickering with Alistair Campbell.

Which political journalists do you rate?

Tony Bevens – died about two years ago but was a relentless journalist. He was the first ever editor of the Independent and would not let the Independent join the lobby as he did not like the way it was run on an unattributable basis. He was very sharp and could not be caught out. At the Express, which at the time was perceived as New Labour, he showed a healthy hatred of politicians. Don McIntyre is also very good, and sharp. And Trevor Kavanagh writes brilliantly.

Which spin doctors do you rate?

Alistair Campbell. He cares and understands and stands to the right hand of Blair. A good spin doctor must be speaking on behalf of, and be perceived by the media to be speaking on behalf of. Hillary Coffman. She is trusted and well known. The Labour Party seem to do well because they have long timers working in their media teams. It takes two years to get to know the press gallery as a whole and if the party media teams keep changing they don't build as close a relationship as longer term teams do. Lobby correspondents need to know and to trust you. The Labour party team are solid and consistent and have been for a long time. Validity is based on how often you walk round and talk to the journalists.

Did you treat print journalists any differently from broadcast journalists?

Yes in that I understood they had different needs but a good spin doctor must understand that there is a cycle of feeding each other. To ignore one would be a waste. If Trevor Kavanagh writes something on the front page of The Sun it is likely it will end up on the 6 o'clock news. National tabloid writers however are not very highly trusted however broadcast journalists are much higher trusted and these broadcasters reach a much larger audience – but often the stories they are broadcasting come from the tabloids. Regional papers have the highest audience figures – Number 10 use this route a lot and even have a dedicated person (David Bradshaw) who just writes articles to be syndicated to them. This is a very effective communications strategy.

Do these regional tactics worry you when companies like Johnson press own so many regional titles?

No – What worried me more are News Corp. Journalists tend to self censor when they work for organisations with known political views and so although a certain stance is never dictated journalists know what they are expected to write. At News Corp, Robin Oakley was very good when he was at the Times for not doing this.

Who is the political gatekeeper?

This varies massively as to who has power but on the whole it remains with journalists. If spin doctors want to generate their own news - sometimes it works and sometimes it won't. With the Lib Democrats it was hard to be part of the story at all. Stories are often two-dimensional and in the political world this means Labour verses Tories. They are Good verses Bad or Anti verses pro, basically black and white stories and it is very hard to get grey into the mix. The journalists are struggling against falling audiences. BBC Online is often inaccurate, as the stories are turned round so quickly with no fact checking. It is tabloid news with the BBC's brand on it.

Who sets the news agenda?

This is entirely based on the story. A government reshuffle or the calling of an election will always be led by the politicians but will also make headline news. The only time when the agenda is not set by the story is when investigative reporting or specific programming comes into play – this will be something like a Panorama investigation being trailed on the BBC News in order to drum up figures for the show – it does not have news values – and other broadcasters / papers would not cover it but it gets onto the news agenda.

IS there anyone else you can suggest I speak to?

Look at the Representation of the People Act and how this covers political coverage during elections. Charles Kennedy always rises in popularity in the first two weeks of an election because people hear about him and during normal sessions they do not. Read Live from Number 10. Shows the standoffs in history between the politicians and journalists. Read Butler and Kavanagh books on election.

A3.6 Interviewee PC6

Date: Thursday September 18, 2003

Place: In interviewee's office

I am looking at the general relationship between the trivariate of politicians, political journalists and political communicators. Firstly I am interested in your views on the changes which you have seen taking place.

There have been three big changes: The first is to do with technology. Any exclusive is now old after the first editions have come out so nothing is exclusive for very long. Technology means what is wrong can be changed very quickly so the politician's ability to be trade stories has been cut massively and as they are so short lived trading is difficult. Used to be able to trade but now cannot. Secondly 24 hour TV news means nothing is exclusive now. Finally, competition used to be achieved by being something different but now it is by doing the same thing. No-one wants to be left behind and they feel vindicated by doing the same thing. They all want the same stories. The two most interesting things in the UK are that there are more outlets for news than any other country and these need huge resources to cover them all and this is impossible to manage, and that the appetite for gossip is extraordinary. Most stuff on TV is not news. I.e. the leaked security documents. Newspapers now have to write stuff such as "according to the Guardian" which they hate doing. They have to feed off each other. This never happens in the USA. Most of these things have happened since Margaret Thatcher. I thought TV would take over the lead role but newspapers still rule.

What about the Today programme?

Today is only listened to by 600,000 people and they are all in the village. It had more influence in Margaret Thatcher's day than now as it was used by MPs to debate, but it is not used in that way any more. The level of coverage of politics and business and things which used to be confined to newspapers is now enormous. What used to be in the broadsheets is now everywhere. Also the individual importance of a particular discussion point has diminished. Today has become a caricature of itself. They only care about competing against Newsnight. The level of importance is miniscule. Many more people listen to the news stories on IRN. IRN has many more listeners. Everybody though has the same news. Stories about a story have got longer and more complicated and bits of detail get blown up.

Why?

Because of the redefinition of competition and of technology: more uses of technology and the use of technology because it exists. What did people do before mobile phones? Enormous number of people get news from the internet, another outlet for the same stories.

But what if they are looking at broadcast companies on the net?

The BBC is the brand leader in the dissemination of news but this does not make it more authoritative - just more used. The biggest loser is ITV. News there has diminished but they never wanted to do it in the first place. Why create less of the news? Breakfast television for instance. Breakfast shows in the US are much more important but we do not have that here. It does not travel.

What is your role with political journalists?

It is not a generalist thing. Specialists working in a sector. With politics - most of the time you do not want to get a political story in the press - you are more likely to try and stop them.

How has this changed since Labour came into power?

Much more detailed now. Much more critical. Most news reporting is comment and not news. The government always been most important and always have been so as far as political parties are concerned. The Labour Party is not believed by anyone, the Conservatives are just ignored and the Liberal Democrats don't exist. The political communicators in the Lib Dems are rubbish and live off fairness. Conservatives get more coverage than they deserve but generally there is a very low acceptance that the government has lots of influence over life.

Is this why voting is so low?

No. It is because we cannot use technology to vote and because of apathy. People aren't interested in politics. Firstly, it's because we are very prosperous. Our prosperity goes up every year. People are far more comfortable with their financial positions now. Secondly, there is so little difference between political parties – there is nothing to choose between. Thirdly, people managed to free themselves from the state. They do not believe voting makes any difference. Fourthly, there used to be more issues such as capital punishment and CND which split people but now all parties have the same policies and take similar lines so there are no major campaigns. Only petrol has been like this recently. Finally, we just put up with things. It is just not in our instincts to demonstrate.

What are your views on sourcing in the wake of the Hutton enquiry?

Still need transparency. Do not believe we have it clear. The Number 10 lobby briefing is a disgrace but also Tony Blair should not be able to hold presidential briefing the opposition should have a chance too. Number 10 briefing should be on TV but should not get the levels of indulgence that we give it now. Once New Labour started lying it had to keep lying. Labour Party tried to deceive public about putting taxes up. i.e. we will not put up taxes. So they now can't admit that they have so keep having to lie. This has debased the whole process and it is aided and abetted by a willing media. We need transparency and should have no cosiness. We could ban off the record briefings by saying journalists must give name of the briefer. Transparency is the answer to everything. Regulation is what we get because people aren't transparent. If everybody just told each other everything it would be fine. There was a brief period in which we got away with it but eventually they got cut down to size. Tony Blair hasn't shown any anguish over wars. All three have been illegal: first ever example of NATO attacking. There is an element of right and an element of truth but not all of it is true. In my day, special advisers dealt with the editors and the Government Information Service dealt with the journalists. People became politically associated but I only talked about political party stuff. I only met [Head of Press] twice in the eight years I worked for [Prime Minister]. We were never called into a room at the same time. There was much more separation. There was a clear understanding that the rules were the rules. Alistair Campbell had three jobs: head of government communications, head of the political party's communications and the Prime Minister's spokesman. The trouble Campbell got into was because Campbell was emotionally involved.

Could that not be said about Bernard Ingham?

No, that is not true.

Is it a question of individual character?

These people are of bad characters.

But is it not worth it in a better cause?

The ends do not justify the means. I do think that that with freedom comes responsibility. We live in first country in the world and do not hesitate to complain when in another country but do not notice in this country. We do not have any moral teaching. People do not know who is good and

bad and politicians capitalise on that. The greatest problem with our system is the re-election process when we all know that power corrupts. It is difficult for the general public to get political philosophy but parties should have a version but there is a but gap between the two: Labour Party look for redistribution of wealth and the Conservative Party look for creation of wealth. We have a supine media who have forgotten about the creation of wealth. Means tested benefits.

Why aren't the Tory papers standing up for this?

Cannot just look at newspapers – must look at their history, their editors, owners etc. The Sun started as Labour then, in the 1970s, it went to the Tories and then in 1997 it turned back to its roots to support Labour as it did not want to back a loser. It was because they bought bullshit from Blair, Mandelson and Campbell and Murdoch saw who was likely to win the election so they set about campaigning. Murdoch is an innate Conservative and in most other countries backs the right. I.e. Bush in the USA. Here though they bought the bullshit.

Are the media the opposition now rather than the Conservatives?

No. The BBC propaganda is all arrogance. Arrogance of media collectively is awe-inspiring. Not as individuals but as a whole. The BBC get all the money but they cannot do it properly. It is a control and command system. It is a state owned TV channel. Outside the UK people believe it is not independent. They claim they cannot be biased because they upset both sides so they say they must have got it right.

Why have you not stood for election?

Because I am lucky enough to have worked for the best leaders in the last 30 years. I have the philosophy that 'all may grow strong but none at the detriment of each other' Thatcher used this line when she started. The Internet is out of control of politicians and public use it away from them. I think Alistair Campbell should be in prison. I have been called the grandfather of spin doctoring. I find this an insult. If you have values of your own and live a decent life and if you treat people in a decent manner then you will have a nice life. I have lied to journalists but afterwards I have phoned them up and apologised. People aren't bought up properly any more. The values shown in Eastenders etc are appalling. The devil seduces people. There are three great confusions: tolerance and licence, pleasure and joy and allowing verses encouraging. Words must be consistent with deeds. This government does not care. They should be honest and apologising for it. With Thatcher, it was fascinating to be with someone who was in a nasty trade but her values were pure. I have worked for people who have really made a difference in this world. You cannot win an argument with Margaret Thatcher on politics. Working with DeClerk was the most extraordinary experience. He personally undid an evil party. The change he ran was huge. He said he had a vision. I also worked for Yeltsin. They were real people with real issues. The men in Blair's government are not men with vision but with petty titles in control. Major was the same. He wanted to be PM. Tony Blair wants to get his own back on the previous 100 years. Tony Blair I find charming but I disagree with everything he agrees with.

APPENDIX FOUR – PRESS OFFICER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**A4.1 Interviewee PO1**

Date: Wednesday August 27, 2003

Place: The tea rooms of the Institute of Directors

I explained the background to my research and asked for his views

I do not want to be defensive but it is said I am the first spin doctor but I was not. Right from 1945 when the GIS was established, a rudimentary civil service, all government communications stuff was operated under constraints which were justified to prevent government from employing people from the party political scene. All those who work for government must all be related to government. This stopped money being spent at all for party political ends and ensured respect of parliament and treating all people alike and not having favourites in the dissemination of news. In our politically correct society it is fashionable to snigger at these constraints which keep a close watch on what we did and ministers did not like having their integrity questioned. In this way the present regime could never have existed. We did not always get it right. I mean not seeing the increasing power, arrogance, nastiness of media did not put people under pressure but an entirely different non wholesome regime existed before 1997. Reason for this was government was not organised as presentation operation. Of course presentation matters and it was a part of writing of statements and what you present when something is important but policy was prominent. The civil service distained the communications function. This is in the Mountfield report. In information business weren't good at anything else." Not unknown for someone to have a breakdown when presenting in those days. This administration's civil service was in contrast and GIS was a second class citizen. Therefore we entered an entirely new era in 1997. Hutton report is what happens when presentation is at the centre of the government. Presentation has taken over. This is just as bad as when policy takes over which is what happens the other way round. Need better balance and this is what future governments should act under. Communications people should be admitted to loop of information they should be under a form of control of politicians but they should know what is going on. Tony Blair has taken it all to excess. Failed to live up to reality. This contemptuous view has taken over and allowed the government to leave aside other problems. This is one of the most urgent things for the future government to address. In a world in which task is made very difficult by a superficial conspiracy ridden, arrogant media.

Had the media changed?

It was possible until the 1970s to have a sensible relationship with journalists. Editors were mostly independent minds (in their proprietors views) and would not take kindly to bullying, lying, misleading and whatever they put a history of trusting government very badly i.e. MacDonald, Baldwin appallingly (only gave one interview) and Atlee was also treated pretty badly so we were not inclined to grumble about the treatment that Margaret Thatcher was given. Before the 1970s they accepted embargoes, did not break them and they did keep confidences (Vassel case) provided you played the way they played. I did not think I played unfairly with them.

What changed?

Firstly the Government got more corrupt then the power of the media rose. Media couldn't be divorced from the morays of the times and morality of the age. Prevailing atmospheres. The 1960s was a grievous decade as it showed the end of deference (which was a good thing) respect for authority, conspiracy there, cynicism rose in society. The 60s was a vestige of Victorian restraint and replaced by unreliable, nasty, sneering media tending to judge other people by themselves. This coincided with the arrival of the GIS. Important that caveat should be made. Not saying all journalists were unreliable, anti social, impossible to live with. They aren't. But the nature of the media is to put pressure on most honourable of men on what they were not wanting to do. Strained

relationship. Trust went out of the window. Government spokespeople must be careful of what they say and that breeds suspicion that they are hiding something and we had to manage relationships. Not surprisingly there are many tensions. Left out the media factor. The media stopped being an agent of truth, beauty and light (Delane, 1852) in the 1970s when they became campaigners. Always been campaigners and long may there be campaigning journalists but journalists who camp on perceived wrongs, not only their own beliefs. Now seeing the politicisation of journalists. Especially by environmental groups. What happened in 1997 was the ultimate politicisation of media as Campbell rewrote the rules. One was to leak every policy in advance of publication regardless of parliament in these journals which wrote them up as he would like to see them written up. There was a corruption of journalists. Did not occur in my time. I did not practice that at all (some ministers did but own favours for politicians to embarrass government to give more money. What I cannot forgive media for is slavish acceptance or favouritism and denial for their behaviour doing. This government I find abdominal. Not intended but it is a poodle media. It is eroding since 2000 because of the way editors were treated on the way to the Dome and some are still poodles to benefit their careers. I think this is appalling. I said this in 1990s they were too slavish. I did not believe that is the function of media in democratic society but it is also not their job to see a crook under every bed. But media has changed: politicised, bought and corrupted. Where democracy is in powerful state, government with large majority has been constrained by all elements in constitution which are supposed to constrain power. Such as the: Cabinet - They just rubber-stamp everything. MPs - they are the biggest poodles, they've not scrutinised government in anything except pushing through their manifesto. Opposition is non-existent. Senior civil servants - should keep politics clean but have been steamrollered. Hutton is an example. Media - Done nothing before but now exercising more control. Most effective are these seen to be opposition but now becoming more questioning and effective. Any thesis on the government / media nexus must reach same consequences about society and they are dire. The political class is not looking for the relationship we ought to have to raise this issue. The balance is clearly wrong and we need to we get a better balance which produces more open and honest society.

Are the media taking over opposition role?

Media should not be nasty. They should be questioning. Media must realise it is part of society and they should not ruin society. I remember after the 1993 election, the Guardian etc said Thatcher was too powerful and we could provide opposition. They did not see that in 1997 election.

What changed?

Partly in media we have treated Tony Blair with some scepticism with the same disdain as they had treated every other government with contempt.

Why this change?

In part it is due to 18 years of Conservative rule. Our system is not in tune with such a long term in government. But must recognise it is unhealthy for one government to be in power for such a long time. Media automatically see government as corrupt. Blair gave a sharp contrast to the greyness and was not as ineffectual as John Major had been. They were yearning for charisma and power and found it in Tony Blair and blew it up. Murdoch went over to Blair, not for ideological reasons, but for commercial advantage. He wanted to be with a winner. Methods by Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell were to reward and rubbish journalists to their editors and to conduct a reign of terror. Trevor Kavanagh said Alistair Campbell was fairly careful about rubbing journalists to their editors but Campbell is a nasty, evil man. He is utterly untrustworthy. He tried to get rid of Trevor Kavanagh. The media found it was Labour's turn and they wanted to give them a good chance. They took care the first two years but not the rest of the time. But this does not explain why they continue to act as they do. But if opposition had been better they may have been weakened early. It was a victim of the Peter Mandelson and Max Clifford conspiracy to trace all wayward Tories to the wrong beds.

Labour party are just as bad but none (except Cook, Betts and Byers) have had their indiscretions recorded. The media are less cowed now and the more the Tories look as though they might succeed the more they might have to look at their future careers and they will be more circumspect about what they write about Tories. This is a curious definition of journalism as the defender of truth, beauty and light.

In your time at number 10, did you trust journalists?

Some but not all that I trusted some to behave properly. Not in general. Quite a number of them were out to do down the government. I never told any journalist things I did not want published. That would be madness. But you can make mistakes and be careless sometimes. I know this after my first problem with Francis Pimm, that anything remotely quotable would be used against me if it could be. When it was claimed I was rubbishing ministers it actually did them a lot of good. They lasted a lot longer in government after that and I got the hassle about it!

Do you think that political correspondents have got more professional since your time working with them?

No. They have got more ruthlessly nasty. What people do not understand that under constraints I have outlined we had to be incredibly ingenious to get views out there. The system meant this. We had to be ingenious and clever to get over elements of policy. Image of ministers sprang from policy and from departmental performance rather than from their performance in front of the media.

Did you need different skills then?

Now need a determination for politics which could be distained excessive. We had politicians who did not bother with newspapers and television. They did not worry about it. Then what mattered was what you did and what you achieved. Integrity of purpose and execution. This makes me sound like a goody two shoes but everyone of my colleagues were of a different wholesomeness and character than we have now. I could never have believed under our democracy this could have happened. Nobody has any real clue as to how to put it right. One thought is that it will decrease even more. Would help if we had a more serious class of ideology. Only difference now is Tony Blair says is executive performance rather than ideological belief but Gordon Brown is putting this to bed. But what will help is a relationship with ideology which is good for their taking if they achieve the right balance of policy and presentation. Labours machine is not trusted but it is effective.

Is it a difficult machine to believe?

Yes. Campbell and Mandelson run a machine of politicians who do not think they have beliefs. Mandelson is still behind the scenes. When Campbell resigns he will still be behind the scenes.

Tell me more about your views on politicisation?

If people abuse the system then you change the system. The honest will suffer but it is the only way to do it. When people broke embargoes we stopped giving them information ahead of time and had no embargoes for them to break. It was a system designed to help them and they ruined it. Now press offices are under pressure to get stories in papers so have favourites even to the point of discriminating.

What about the changes Campbell has made to the Lobby briefings?

Not made any difference at all. Lot of pretentious nonsense. Does not help radio and TV in any way as they are not admitted in order to keep the anonymity of the spokesmen. It has not made the media give out anything any differently as it is still non attributable. And the non-attributable

briefings and stuff still persist. All that you have is “the PMOS said this” whereas in our time it was “sources close to the Prime Minister said this.” It is a lot of pretentious nonsense. It has not made Campbell go word for word on the record where it matters, especially where it matters. People still brief anonymously except in a way which is merely presentational change. Do not object to it but the reason I did not do it was because I believed in the atmosphere of the time. They were here insisting on cameras which we believed would have killed the system. Alistair Campbell would be in better authority if he was an elected official in Cabinet and having to stand up and be counted. This must be considered for the future.

A4.1 Interviewee PO2

Date: Friday July 25, 2003

Place: In SO.UK.SO.HO bar, London.

Call you tell me about your time at number 10?

I was at Number 10 for eight years (1986-1994) Thatcher was a puritan at heart wanting to be seen as open as possible. It was a big eight years – we had the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War.

How many worked in number 10 at that time?

Whole of Number 10 was only about 70 people and that included the cleaners. There were seven or eight people in the press office. At Number 10 there were eight in the press office, four party political people (the top people's link to CCO – they did the political stuff), then there was the policy unit with six people and then six or seven people in a think tank (coming out with the back to basics ideas). Then there were the secretaries, cleaners and detectives.

Did you all fit into Number 10?

They were all physically in Number 10. Number 10 is actually two buildings, the front part designed by George Downing (hence the name of the street) and the back which was part of the old palace of Westminster which was destroyed in a fire. There is a small front to the building but once you go inside you find it is massive. I arrived there just before Thatcher's third term. It was a very exciting time to be there – it was a very tight ship which was run – everything either went through Bernard Ingham or the Private Secretary. Thatcher was very clear. All her decisions were based on her own strong convictions so they could second guess in advance so Bernard Ingham could answer all the Lobby questions. This attitude defined the era. I only had a small role but I defined my role by doing all the visual media. Very day-to-day discreet stuff. If you have the confidence of the people you are working with there then you will achieve more. There is not a bad picture of Margaret Thatcher as all the media saw what they were trying to do. Then she left Downing Street. John Major did not have the confidence of Thatcher so the relationship broke down and the media lost confidence. Major was much more insecure when it came to the media and in turn its role became much less stable. This ground him down. The Labour Party learnt from the lessons of the past, and especially Major, by Mandelson and Blair, and learnt how to communicate and how to control policy decisions and how to give out announcements and utilise the governments desperation. The problems with the media relationship during Major meant that the civil service got sucked in and the whole thing became political. Civil servants were getting desperate.

What changes have there been since Labour got in, in 1997?

When Labour won the election they were able to (because the civil service was so demoralised) march their own team straight into Downing Street and the Special Advisors were able to become much more important than they had been in the past. Bernard Ingham fought for two years to get an extra press officer. Labour doubled the amount of press officers in one night and they had much more say in what happened in central government and that has changed the relationship between

media and government. The government have learnt the lessons from the media in news management. The Labour Party had, in opposition, become more adept than the media in how to control the news agenda and they left very little to chance. The first thing they did was centralise department messages. Thatcher had centralised the communications and then under Major it went back to the departments and this went against him. Blair went back to putting all departments into one overall plan so the media had very little leeway in getting stories and getting anything out of the departments and this damaged the democratic process, something which was already being damaged by the way Number 10 was sidestepping Parliament, and pitched the government and the media against each other. They are now starting to back down.

Did you expect it to take this long?

It has taken longer than I expected. They have had a long honeymoon period. They have started to learn their lesson and the civil service are beginning to get equilibrium. Labour did not trust the civil service but gave them an excuse to clear out the heads of departments. It has only been in recent years that he has had to rely more on civil servants and he has realised they can do the job well and can be non-partisan. In an ideal world civil servants should have been able to speak frankly as they did with Margaret Thatcher. She liked a fight and liked those people who stood up to her. You could have an honest discussion with her but with this new system the wrong decision can be made, as there is no one impartial there to tell the politicians when something is wrong. They must now rely more on civil servants for day-to-day work. They tried to side step the civil service and realised they could not. Now the relationship with the media has broken down and no one knows who to trust. Everyone has realised it cannot go on and that something has to change. The people Tony Blair can trust are gradually being discredited, i.e. Mandelson and Campbell. Mandelson is still loyal but will never have an official status again. Under Thatcher there was a very effective situation. It was not heavy-handed and it was lots of fun working for her. Towards the end she got too big for her boots and lost touch with the party and the people. Tony Blair had integrity but he has lost that now because people do not believe him any more.

When you worked at Number 10 did you trust political journalists?

It was a game. Bernard Ingham was very protective. We were very straight. I inherited a tricky period for the government (after Westland) and Bernard Ingham protected us. We had set relationship with journalists. Because Thatcher was so clear about her stances, when things developed sold lines on things and knew what to say. An analogy I use is that Number 10 is like the Mississippi (long and shallow) and Government departments are like the Grand Canyon (deep but thin). At Number 10 you could get involved with lots of things but only at a superficial level. We were driving policy and could know what was going to be on the news. Bernard Ingham had a combative relationship but they trusted him as the voice of Thatcher. It was an open time but was not perfect. It was a relatively straightforward relationship.

Which groups of journalists did you build a relationship with?

The diary guys liked me because we did interesting stuff. Could give them a bit more information. It was built on trust. Because we were accommodating and helped them they did not let us down. Because Thatcher was open about what she stood for that made it easier. Major was never comfortable in his role. I left because not fun any more. Major did not have the same vision. And vision is power and power is sexy. Thatcher never read her cuttings she just read a summarised version. She trusted what we told her about how she was being perceived in the media. Major was too sensitive and the trust broke down. They needed a great relationship of trust but Major clamed up and gave them nothing and so they awful pictures. The Labour Party had lined the patrol without giving anything back.

Did the press officers stay on after Thatcher left?

Most of the press office left when Thatcher left. Thatcher was very imperial. Royal presence role – Queen and courtier. Was picked for the job because I was wacky and someone who could make Number 10 seem human. I tried to show the human side to anyone who visited Number 10.

How did you know when you had been successful?

When I was controlling the news agenda. It was depicting news in most interesting way. Thatcher realised the importance of history as it was happening. She knew things were important as they happened and knew that a visual image affected this. Like when Gorbachov visited the UK and we managed to capture that. Sky had just come in so we used it. BBC, ITN and SKY all worked together and filmed the arrival live and went live into the news. As they drove into Downing St BBC filmed, then as they went into the hall, ITN filmed and then going up the stairs SKY took over. This all went live into the 10 o'clock news.

How much discussion went on about this?

Lots – it was very vocal. But Thatcher loved doing the visual stuff. It was a very important moment and we got it live and it was timed brilliantly. Both media and politicians do not trust each other enough to do it today. A lot has been lost. News has turned into spin and this is disingenuous. You at least know that Thatcher believed what she was saying. There was always a class element with Thatcher. It was very exciting – driving in a convoy at fast speeds through capitals with the Prime Minister. It was very exciting. It was sexy. Then you have the Major household and it was just a normal family home. It was one extreme to the other. It was a much lower temperature. Blair has cranked it up again. Blair got any with a lot more. Blair and Thatcher too alike. It will take a long time to blast any relationship which is not partisan. They rely on media to give you the news. Now have totally polarised media so every story is linked with government and this cannot be healthy. In Margaret Thatcher's reign lots of discussion but not now. With Blair everyone is very blasé. It was not perfect before but now much more management. Whatever spinning went on in those days it was nothing compared to what goes on now.

Which spin doctors do you admire now?

Alistair Campbell. And I also have friends at Number 10. I would not want to name names but they have learnt you do not win by spin. I do feel sorry for them but they deserve most of what they get and the fact that people have turned on them. With the Weapons of Mass Destruction story, we are unable as a country to take Tony Blair at word - everything is taken to such extremes. It has cost a war and Dr Kelly's life. Is it worth it just to control the news agenda? It is a similar thing happening with the Falklands but Thatcher got away with it but they were British and media much better controlled by the government. If one places such great store by communications you can never escape that. They seem to have strategy on communications before they have the policy decided. One example is Fox hunting. Have a communications strategy but not policy. If story becomes way you tell it rather than what you tell.

What tactics did you use?

A lot of it was instinctive.

Were you ever a journalist before going to Number 10?

No – a civil servant. I never had any journalism training. With Thatcher a lot of it was luck. Bernard Ingham wanted me – it would get really busy. I talked to lobby and visual journalists. This was political in own right. Visual was just as political as anything else. I developed a rapport about how handled. All trusted each other so we would use what was happening instinctively but created atmosphere while it was OK to say no. We had the power that if we ever said no people

sat up and listened. When I stopped a Russian photographer from taking a photo the photographer took out the film and handed it over. I tried to have an innate sense of what would work.

With every visual decision you had to decide on two things: Is this going to make the Prime Minister look cheap and is this going to devalue the office of the Prime Minister.

When I shouted at Major once during a photo shoot and he reacted instantly I realised how much power I had. Thatcher was a real free spirit. She had no real idea of how she looked. In the main she just went for it. Think of all the great pictures of her. She had lots of great pictures, Major had a couple and Blair has very few.

Did you treat the broadcast and printed press any differently?

With the printed press you can never control what they write but you can give it in a way that is helpful so they tend to write in a nicer way. With the broadcast media it was more controllable and meant we could make them look good and would work through questions in advance and think through the answers. We would rehearse before interviews – very strong part of my job. Had only two takes in order to get Major's Gulf war statement right.

Why do you not like the phrase 'spin doctor'?

Most political communication based judgements can be done straight and it is indicative of way politics has gone that it has to have a judgement. The phrase demeans what should be a more straightforward job. There was not much spinning going on with Thatcher because she was so straight. She was not spinning. We need to get back to a more honest form of communication. In every debate the heart needs to be conveyed and then debated and if people have not good facility to have open debate about issue then democracy is in danger and how can you create the fabric of society beneath spinning and issues which need to be debated and we did not have a forum for this to happen as everything is tempered by the spin. Thatcher allowed debate, Blair controls the news agenda so much no debate is allowed. After Thatcher the honesty has gone.

A4.1 Interviewee PO3

Date: Tuesday July 22, 2003

Place: In a corridor of the interviewee's department

How do press relations work in the [department]?

Each minister in the [department] has a personal press officer. [XXXX] is the head of press, head of the press department but also press secretary for the Minister of State. No junior ministers have special advisors. And no minister owns their Press Officer. All work in press office rather than in their private offices. It is now such a competitive system – we centralise bids and decide them all centrally so have a coherent message of what want to get out.

How do you work with Special Advisors?

Only the [minister] has a Special Advisor. In the press team we would get the special advisor involved in the media planning stage mainly because it is with [department] it is easier to differentiate what is party political and what is not. Some issues the civil service have to step back and special advisors take control but not always clear where the line is. The civil servants write submissions to ministers and they will be cleared through special advisors.

Do they ask for this?

We must accept the fact that they need to know what the left and right hands are doing. We have a very good relationship. They do not muscle in. They can make suggestions but do not tell us

what to do. Most of it is informal. There is an awful lot of attention put on the part government and Alistair Campbell play but it takes a lot of the heat off the Sir Humphrey system as ministers have good sources of advice.

Do the media tend to go to you or the special advisor?

Us in theory. They are not meant to go to the special advisors or straight to the ministers but often they do. Some ministers do not trust their press officers to have their best interests at heart or feel they will represent them or try to get them re-elected.

Is that your role?

No.

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

Where special advisors set up lunches for their ministers to raise their profile. Press Officers will not do that. Peter Hain thinks his last press officer was responsible for getting him into the Cabinet. Some junior ministers think the civil service does not understand their role in the press. My minister, [XXXX] was a former journalist and knows the lobby very well so they go to him but others have very different relationships with their ministers. If a policy issue works very smoothly a journalist normally comes to the press office and will get a freelance quote. The [Department] is very hierarchical. The Press Office is the only exception. It works very smoothly and can react quickly. It is harder when there are more political issues or shameless campaigning. But then we work closely with the people in our minister's parliamentary office – but this is all down to our personal relationships.

Do journalists play on bad relationships?

Yes. I.e. if the [department] says one thing and the minister says another thing and the parliamentary office another there will be stories about splits in the party and disconnection stories.

How often do you talk to journalists?

All day every day. Varies. Lots of talking to diplomatic correspondents not to lobby so much. But I talk to lobby more than foreign editors. We work closely with the Number 10 lobby briefings but we also have ad hoc briefings. We will soon reinstate fortnightly media briefings.

Are you main contacts the diplomatic or lobby correspondents?

Down to personal relationships. Europe have political issues but if it is a fairly non party issue then it comes down to who will be most useful to us. If being screwed by commission will go to the Sun or the Times. It depends on who will be most sympathetic.

Do you treat the broadcast or print journalists any differently?

Not substantively. Broadcast are so much more demanding. If working on half hour slots then they will be a lot more forceful. Different people need different handling. The US media ask much easier questions. The Today programme is very aggressive and will empty chair you ('we invited the minister along but he refused') at the drop of a hat by phoning you up at 11:30pm and then wondering why you can't get someone there for 6am the next morning.

What hours do you staff the press office?

The duty officer starts at 6am and goes on all night. We say we will not take any bids after midnight.

Do you have priorities in who you grant interviews to?

Not officially. First we will give interviews to the domestic press and then we will give them to Today. We have a love hate relationship with Today. Cannot not do it because they set the news agenda for the day. Beyond that we have no list. There is no structure to it – we try to be fairly even. There is no system to say who has had the most interviews. There are huge numbers of calls into the press office. The lobby and diplomatic corp. seem to be happy about how the interviews are spread around. They get a lot of attention. They go to us or Number 10. Do not take their complaining too seriously.

Do you socialise with journalists?

Yes. Part of contact building is going out and drinking with journalists. But journalists drank much more 10 to 15 years ago.

Do you trust political journalists?

Depends on who they are. Have to build on a trust. If you assume you will get burned. There is a constant process of changing. Have to get to know journalists pretty well before feeding them stories. But have to push boundaries a bit or they won't think of you.

I know you have only worked for the civil service since the Labour Party came into power but do you detect any changes since 1997?

I joined too late to know. If you look at numbers though, in 1998 there were six press officers here and now there are 18 to 20 of us. This is a reflection on the whole of government and on the appetite for comment. But to be sure you would have to ask someone who was here pre 1997. But if there are changes, maybe it is due to the rise in 24 hour news.

Who do you consider to be the political gatekeeper?

Bit of both but if had to say one, would say politicians have more control than the other but then journalists have more control because there are so many news sources available to them, it becomes hard and very difficult to close stories down. It is easier for journalists to be selective than the government can be. We have to try and get what we want, but it is a relationship.

Who sets the news agenda?

Bit of both. Events for the [department] set the agenda. We try to be as active as we can in getting stories out that show the government out doing good things such as diplomatic work, development work, WHO etc. but a lot of them take the view that anything we want to get out is not news to journalists.

APPENDIX FIVE – PR INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**A5.1 Interviewee PR1**

Date: Wednesday August 20, 2003

Place: At interviewee's office

How would you describe the relationship between political communicators and political journalists?

Evolving. The way we position here is we are much more lobbyist than with the US approach where they get the media involved. We advise the government on our clients and advise our clients on the government's strategy. Others here will do the media side. Big changes in how we use the media. This is a function of New Labour. Under the Tories, getting the message across was no problem but this government has made it harder for clients to speak to them so now we must use the media to speak for them instead. Now we are more worried about what the Mail will say about us. With political journalists there are two sorts of relationships: firstly they are looking for stories from the lobbyists and secondly they are looking for stories about the lobbyists (and this includes stories about spin doctors). Our relationship tends to be very personality based rather than institutionally based. People within the company have their own journalistic relationships. They see us as providers of information rather than people they want to hate or beat up. Government hates us and always will. The APPC is looking at the way lobbyists are used at the moment. They have a problem with the way we are defined in the Cabinet Office code of conduct. Government have very low view of [company]. Government just see us as peddling access not as part of the client team.

Do you think the situation has changed since you worked as a government media advisor?

Government spin doctors are more seen. I do not think it has changed much. They are a great deal more professional but the rudiments have not changed. In 1984 my minister [name of former minister] was highly contemptuous about civil service press offices. I do not think we have seen a change of kind, just a change of scale. All governments try to control the media they have just got better at it now. The longer they are in office, the harder it is to take control of the agenda. My own relationship with journalists is not based on who I work for despite the fact the company is very well known. It is based on their views of our stance on politics and our personal relationships. They also have a respect for us for knowing how they work – i.e. we would never phone them right before deadline.

Do you think journalism is a profession or a trade?

Trade.

And spin doctoring?

Trade.

What do you think people outside the media world think?

My mother thinks it is institutionally corrupt! The public affairs industry has done itself a massive disservice in its first 15 years of existence, if we say the industry is about 30 years old. We sold what we did on the basis of our address books and not on our skills. It was very secretive and classed as a dark art so people got the view that what we did was sleazy. What we actually are is information brokers. We suck in information from clients and suck in information from the government and repackage it and sent it out. We have a very bad reputation and we need to demystify it. If you look on the Web site for the US lobbyist association it talks about how they

make a contribution to civic life. We are about 10 years away from this in the UK. We could not get away with saying that now.

Do you trust journalists?

I trust them to react in the way that I would predict them to. The ones I deal with have never let me down if it is off the record. Especially if they were given the angle and objective. If you toss a dog a bone he crews it.

How do you define whether your work has been successful?

From the inputs we give to clients, the monthly meetings, and the outputs such as opinion research on the client – but it is always hard to see anything in black and white.

What sort of media techniques do you use?

I tell them the truth. If trying to interest a political journalist in picking up a story I will give it to them warts and all so they know you are not lying to them. If you try and cover their eyes about a bad bit they will still find out and just give you negative coverage and not trust you in the future. Sometimes you have to become more Alistair Campbell like and need to be assertively aggressive. Sometimes I will refuse to do interview to stop a story getting legs if defending a story it is at least stopped.

What is your product?

Knowledge and credibility in the system.

Who do you see as the gatekeeper?

It depends on the circumstances. It is a trade. We only ask for information from civil servants if we are prepared to give them something back. We share information and help each other out. All gatekeepers depend on the circumstances. Similar to the way journalists do. They get parliamentary information and I get client information. Credibility is very important.

Who sets the news agenda?

The Today programme! Political journalists have become very lazy. There is only one decent investigative journalist left in the lobby, David Hencke.

Why is this?

They are so lazy. It is because they can get away with it.

But why, when this should be such a popular job?

You would have thought so. Some time ago ministers were less into speaking to journalists than they are now. It was a more differential relationship and now the party machine starts to give information to journalists which means it is easier for them not to go out and look for it. Even Peter Hain will now make an effort to say hello to the grad trainees at the Times. This would never have happened in the past. The journalists now do not have to make so much effort. Only a small number of people still question as they once did. Even people who have been doing this a long time now realise they have a nice cushy job. The people at the top are very good and will always be very good and they are not particularly lazy but you will be struggling to find more than a handful of them who are really good. One of the things I don't like is the growth of the sketch writer, i.e. The Times having a sketch writer of the Hutton enquiry.

When do you think spin began?

What we have seen is an increase in the quantity and quality of spin. Socrates has a good quote on the definition of spin. It is not new. There has been no change.

To whom are you responsible?

My client list. My shareholders

To whom are journalists responsible?

Their publication's shareholders

To whom are politicians responsible?

It is 50-50 to their party and their constituents.

Do you feel journalists have an obligation to act as watchdogs on the government?

Only because no one else is doing it. In a perfect world no one would need to. Journalists would neither believe what they were given without questioning nor would they ask to hold government to account but in our imperfect world it has become part of their role.

A5.2 Interviewee PR2

Date: Tuesday July 8, 2003

Place: In meeting room in the offices of the interviewee.

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

The media is as powerful as politicians allow them to be. If you live by the media you die by the media. Since 1997 very media savvy government. Very responsive to media policy written in media and by the media. It is the medium through which go government has decided to exercise their power. In the sleaze at end of Tory period in government, the Major years, the mantra with the chair of the party was 'we are not getting our message across.' As if this was some thing highly valuable in their ideology and that it was just a fault in the marketing. Not a fault in the message. It was a misunderstanding on the side of the Tories. Media was doing them in because people were. This government lives by the media and will die by the media. Tories ignored it, that is why Bernard Ingham is so exercised by this. Bernard Ingham had a job very similar to Alistair Campbell's but had a lot less to do. The reason the media turned on the Tories was because the electorate was. Media now turning on the government because they are fed up with the way in which they have played games. Always someone else's power the media are responding to. It is an empty shell. Smoking gun but must be picked up and fired. Never the media itself powerful (not since the times of the great media barons, Beaverbrook etc) The Beaverbrooks wanted political power, the Murdochs want business power – and just use the media to manipulate politics to gain that business power. The business was a rich mans toy. Now it is more picked up by vested interests.

Do you describe yourself as a spin doctor?

It is a phrase I have come to hate.

What would you rather be called?

I dislike the term as it is pejorative. In the mid 1990s it was considered to be a fashionable career option but now it means clever and manipulative. Now it is the 'dark arts'. The watershed moment

was in the late 1990s. In the 2000 London Mayoral elections, Liberal Democrat Susan Kramer stated: 'It is all spin.' Then it became more negative. It had turned round. It was due however to something more fundamental than simply people. It was people getting pissed off with the post-modern era zeitgeist of privatised belief systems, pick and mix ideologies and a desire in all sorts of walks of life for belief systems. There was a longing for people to get involved in polemics and dialectics. In order to do this must decide what to believe in and in this era style is the new content. People are concerned with the issue rather than dealing with issues, Corporate and Social Responsibility programmes came from this but people are becoming fed up with that. Now embarking on deciding on what we believe in. Religion is one compartment of it. Everyone needs to establish what the people they elect believe in because the stakes are very high.

How would you summarise the relationship between journalists and spin doctors?

The media used to be challenged by the politicians, now they are challenged by other media in their own right. An example is John Lloyd who quit the New Statesman over their stance on Iraq. Both groups are manipulatees and manipulators. Relationship between politicians and journalists pre-dates spin doctors and that, at it is simplest was, and is, quite healthy. In fashion and financial PR it is more corrupt. Generally speaking however it was more healthy but media wanted to deny it and kept PR on it is toes. They hate PRs because they have to use them. It made them feel better because hated having vested interests in material. Meant we had to be better. Always been an uneasy relationship. PRs say journalists stitch you up. This is a good dynamic and it serves the readership well. It means that PR has a higher worth in the media and this serves interests of readers quite well. Over and above that is spin doctors but post modern attitudes mean that many social institutions are now subject to the spin culture. About posturing and taking positions rather than issues. All these really important things are victims of the spin culture.

When do you think spin started?

It presented itself in the 1990s but the root causes were in development of end of secularism that post-modernism bought. There were three ages in society that matter here: (1) medieval times: full of superstition, myths, irrationality and religious beliefs, (2) post 18th century: reason, rationale, truth came through. Truth became something you could prove rationally, (3) post modernism: A return to ideology and belief systems without chucking away the rationale. It does not explain everything but accepting it is not enough. That science is not enough. The reaction is against the post modern period of reason and rationale and science. It is a vacuum which will be filled. It is a development on from, not a return to. So that is why there is a desire to bin PR and the conditions that was made to look good and most visible in politics what does the Labour Party do to not spin? Be honest. If I was a client would set out stall and clear its issue management. Not starting from the message now but from what people want to hear. Pioneering issues management approaching the mid 1990s. Honestly tries to do the best – but then must also pay the mortgage? Just trying to do it better than the competition. I sit on the Phillis committee. I joined because I was flattered to be asked. PR cannot be great and good there are vectors. The committee reports in the Autumn. Will include stuff about Campbell's role. What we are trying to do is do it better than other people. Communication is not a management function. This stuff about 'communication has come of age' is bollocks. PR is not a management department. All managers should be able to communicate and if have one person to do it for them it stops the CEO having to do it for themselves.

APPENDIX SIX – JOURNALIST INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**A6.1 Interviewee J1**

Date: Thursday September 18, 2003

Place: The Café at 4 Millbank

I am looking at the relationship between spin doctors, journalists and politicians. I am looking to see how they interact on a day to day basis and how these relationships effect politics, media and democracy in a much bigger way. What are your thoughts on this area?

The big issue with Phillis is that it is fairly good but in the end it will be a much bigger issue. They will concentrate on the daily briefings, where and what terms, and who is going to do them. A recommendation of the Phillis committee was that they wanted to get rid of Alistair Campbell's post altogether but this was not acceptable to Downing Street. David Hill is the right man for the job and will be a good director of communications but there is no locus for him to speak to press on a daily basis. It is all behind the hand stuff. Just what we have had before when Alistair Campbell was briefing widely but doing lots of political manoeuvring and Phillis said this must be cleaned up and if this works this will give them a line of protection. So if it works we will have better system but we have David Hill who is very good but he won't have anything to do unless he gives background briefings to the press – which will have to be one-to-one's and this will be against the committee's recommendations.

What are your views of the day to day relationship at the moment?

I take the structural view that functionally of the press and the electronic media operate in very different ways and in the electronic media we need daily information on the record. We want to report factual information and interviews and politicians need to be on the record. Therefore we are less interested in briefings which are off the record. We cannot report rumours etc because we need to quote sources and this means that we can have much healthier private relationships than newspapers can, because newspapers turn all information, both on and off the record, into stories so information officers are more careful with them. The Hutton enquiry is one such example. My view, without going into rights and wrongs of it, is the reason Today got into trouble was because Gilligan was acting in the way that newspapers operate. In TV, people want information first and on the record, not scoops. If we report suspicion that would only be as backshading, not the main story because you must report more directly related to the story. I think one problem is because in opposition, New Labour was very effective but now all the lines have been blurred between what is on the record and what is off. There is also a blurred line between the role of civil servants and political appointees. This is not new but New Labour have used communications to their advantage. New Labour have not dealt with this separation at all.

On this issue, how do you see the roles of press officers and special advisers?

It is very difficult to distinguish between the two. Civil Servants are clearly identified with political purpose of the government. They are serving their masters. Some press officers are more reticent than the political advisors but generally, in their one-to-one contacts, it is very hard to see a difference in their attitude. I do not really care if they are civil servants or political advisors but there must be absolute standards that they all stick to that they do not lie or mislead. My view is that the issue is of standards in public life. It would be helpful for civil servants in the system to know that they can refuse to do things they feel are political. I want to see as much on the record as possible. We do not have history of open government in this country and my drive is to go down that route. It would suit civil servants very well and politicians.

Would you like to see the daily briefings televised then?

The issue is about it going on camera. I think that what we term as primary official events should be on camera, things such as the Hutton enquiry and parliament but things which are not being run by elected officials (i.e. secondary events) should not necessarily be and public briefings on camera would change the atmosphere and less information would be given out. Also I think that TV would lose out because if spokesmen were on camera regularly, access to ministers would probably decrease. But I wobbled over this issue last year about on camera if government won't make changes elsewhere in the way they are run then maybe it would be better if it was televised so people could see how boring it really is! I do not think it is good to have the daily briefings on the record and there are circumstances where people are not getting access to leaders where there are calls for briefings to be on camera. The Lobby is a much maligned organisation for its secrecy and 'freemason' image but only a few times have I been given secret information and both times it was by the Tories and both times it was leaked. If journalists tell things then it is a problem that we as journalists have. This is not healthy. My career has always been with new news organisations and I was helped by the existence of the formal system and it has been very beneficial because it meant we could get the same information as the others. Otherwise it would be much harder for new organisations to get in and break the cartel. When I joined the Lobby, Bernard Ingham said to me that as far as he was concerned I would have the same rights to information as anyone else. So there were positive aspects. There is the mystery about the lobby but all groups of correspondents have their own groups and news beats. Their close circles are more prevalent especially in other areas of journalism. i.e. sports journalists. What we need is not a relationship of dependency but we have got rid of old system but not had a new one put in its place. They should give rights and responsibilities to both sides because if it is slanted too much one way or the other it is the public who lose out.

Playing devils advocate, could the journalists be seen as the spinners?

In defence of journalists in general, and the press in particular, the US correspondents won't quote sources unless they can use their names in stories (especially in the US papers) and this is a good thing in principle but they say British journalists could not operate in this way because the political system is less open and does not give out so much information and no information would ever get out if all sources had to be named. If journalists did not quote the rumours etc then you would be being duped by the government and if you want lively press then we have to reform the structure of government a very long way before you could have the New York Times rules. I was first person who talked about British politics off the cuff with any informality in depth. Partly because of the organisation and partly because of all this new technology means we need someone to be doing mediation. I try not to have an opinion so when I am asked to comment on something I always step back and give lots of views. I do not like having to call it but over time you get the experience to do that. With John Prescott I got it wrong. With Dr Kelly I said that it would have to be journalist question and that Alistair Campbell and Geoff Hoon would find their positions untenable and we will soon see if I got all three. The trust is with viewers and they must be able to trust me so it is for others to judge. Andy Marr is only doing it after me and Hutton shows people have got flip and irresponsible in what they are saying but do not think you would be able to stop it but the need of the news medium is instantaneous and off the cuff and only way to get better is for press to highlight where it goes wrong.

Who are you responsible to?

I am an employee of BSkyB in the first instance and when I got my contract it was discussed what they wanted me to do and within the laws of the land and in the legal sense I am responsible to them. As Political Editor I am also responsible for setting the terms for others in my department. But in the end it is about the relationship with your audience and you would not go on being employed unless the viewers wanted to see you so feel I have a relationship to them to explain and to give them insights of interest to my audience.

Who are political communicators responsible?

Political communicators they are responsible to the political interests that they are serving and there is a general drift to discouraging them to feeling responsible to the public in an absolute sense.

A6.2 Interviewee J2 & J7

Date: Wednesday July 9, 2003

Place: Footsteps restaurant, Westminster

Circumstances: Two journalists being interviewed together – known here as J2 & J7.

What is your day to day relationship like with spin doctors?

(J2) The later you leave it the better. Contact can start first thing in the morning, about six or seven am if you need information for the Today programme.

What are your views on the changes in the Number 10 briefing system?

(J2) There are actually not many changes. Ministers hardly ever actually come to speak to us. All it really means is that people who do work experience can now come along!

Can you tell me more about your day-to-day relationship?

(J2) Tim Allen called incessantly. When I was first appointed to Chief Political Correspondent, [PR] was on the phone within minutes checking he had the right numbers for him and asking if he had his rota correct. It was a subtle way of letting me know he was in control.

(J7) He has called me straight after interviews before to set me straight. After the BBC row they are calling all the time. The does not normally happen – occasionally but not normally.

Which spin doctors do you rate?

(J2) XXXX is very helpful. XXXX is more obvious.

Do you trust them?

(J7) We have to. I trust the civil servants more than the special advisors but even this was undermined with the Cheriegate incident. This did them damage because it showed they were out of the loop. Most of the time trust them, but it is within clearly defined parameters.

(J2) Not sure I trust XXXX. XXXX very straight – understands pressure and understands deadlines and this is king.

(J7) Ian Austin at the Treasury rarely calls back and is bullying. He is flat and very heavy handed.

Does their behaviour effect how you portray their bosses?

(J7) No. It doesn't affect it.

Is Mandelson still active?

(J7) Yes. He has told journalists: 'You are all fucked.' He is 'quietly menacing' and is still close the Prime Minister. He is very good at flattery – whilst quietly chopping people's legs off. He plants ideas quietly and sets up the context for ideas to grow in your mind.

What sort of tactics have you had used on you?

(J2) Late releases. On a Friday the MoD will put out a release at 5:55pm so it is too late for the six o'clock and if it makes it we don't have time to check it out.

(J7) There is also blatant bullying

(J2) Hurling abuse. I have received a 'Fuck Off' from Alistair Campbell after writing a negative piece about him.

What is Alistair Campbell like?

(J7) He is a flirt with women, he bullies men and he patronises younger women. He tailors his operation to his subject.

Who do you think spins well?

(J2) Alistair Campbell is brilliant at his job but he is not just a spin doctor. He is part of the trinity of New Labour: Blair, Mandelson and Campbell. He is more than just a purveyor of messages.

What about the Tories?

(J7) The Tories are getting better. Paul Beaverstock is good. Mike Penning was big thug. Nick Wood can be very abusive and does not like women. He has lost dedication to cause.

(J2) The Labour people are much more clean living.

Are spin doctors professionals?

(J2) They are like a professional but if they allow personality to get in the way it won't work. Amanda Platell was very flirty and quietly frightening.

Do you feel you are treated any differently than the print journalists?

(J2) Yes. We are known to be more neutral. We also have shorter deadlines. They have to deal with us but know they know we can't have an agenda. They find it hard to give a story to the BBC as they cannot spin it. People they hate they do not take them closely. BBC has the trust – they do not. The government looked like they were backing down on the dodgy dossier story but no one will back down now.

(J7) They feed from each other though. The Evening Standard takes lines from Today. In this story Today is setting the agenda. The Sun is very very reliable as is Trevor Kavanagh. He has signals in his writing which show the politicians he knows what is going on although most readers would miss it. He uses this to provide flattery and is his subtle way of insuring his interplay in the village.

Any other tactics which are used on you?

(J2) Being told by a politician that a story is 'only a village thing' and people outside Westminster would not understand or care about it. Or saying that they cannot believe you are boring the nation with this story. Or calling it irrelevant or badly sourced.

(J7) When Peter Mandelson was in charge it was much more spiteful and personal and this happened lots.

(J2) Nick Robinson had an incident with Peter Mandelson where he decided he wanted to 'make him more balanced'. He used to blame all his views on his Tory party background and suggest this was why he was unbalanced. Making people question his judgement, when it was not even in dispute before. This was one of his techniques. This is not out of date and it can still happen.

Who sets the news agenda?

(LT) The Government grid. Labour were very successful at this in the early years.

(J2) Events also set the agenda. They can only control it when they have unity, when no-one will react badly.

To whom are you responsible to as a journalist?

(J2) The Public. They are always the point of what we are doing. We are trying to turn something which is quite complex into something which your granny would understand. This is heightened in the BBC as there are no agendas and no causes they follow.

To whom are spin doctors accountable?

(J7) Their political masters. They are not accountable to the public in any way. They are quite self-serving.

To whom are politicians accountable?

(J7) They have a responsibility to the public as they can be kicked out.

B left at this point and the interview continued with A.

To whom do you feel responsible to?

(J2) To my listeners. It is a trade off between 100% safe reporting but being boring or being riskier but more interesting.

How often to spin doctors complain about your reporting?

(J2) Every few days.

Do spin doctors try to work journalists against each other?

(J2) Yes, all the time.

What do you do if they won't talk to you?

(J2) If we are obviously talking to one side and putting that view across then the other side will come up. Another tactic they use is kite flying. The BBC has changed under Andrew Marr. It is now riskier and they are allowed to know more and be more honest. It has changed quite a lot due to 24 hour news too. There is now so much time to fill that you see more things. If everyone else is getting away with it so why can't we? Print journalists should really effect what is going on. Journalists are standing up to the spin doctors tactics more now though. When Alistair Campbell first came in he, and his people, were very frightening. None of these people seem invincible any more. Peter Mandelson plays people off against each other by saying 'we gave some information to the other journalists.' Yet even Peter Mandelson doesn't seem as menacing any more and it is now the same with Alistair Campbell. He does not command as much respect or authority.

Does anyone?

(J2) No. Not even Blair. Journalists are convinced that Alistair Campbell will leave soon. He should have left over Cherigate and war. There is a limit to the number of tricks which can be used. New Labour introduced new tricks that the UK had not had before.

A6.3 Interview J3

Date: Wednesday July 30, 2003

Place: Interview took place at Speakers Corner.

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

Very. Almost too powerful and if Alistair Campbell was sitting here he would say he is up against the most untrustworthy media in Europe. In the UK we have more newspapers and more media and we are at the cutting edge and these newspapers have the lowest levels of trust. Despite this, broadcast media are much better than print. There is no doubt that the media's power in the UK has gone too far. Examples include the ability of the Sun to destroy Neil Kinnock's reputation and the way Blair was able to use the press to extend the row over sleaze. Blair knows this and is very fearful of Murdoch. The media are very powerful. A Prime Minister is at his or her most powerful when they have all the media behind them – Thatcher was at her most powerful after the Falklands when she had the media's support. The newspapers were also behind her because she did as they wanted and took on the unions. She was at her most powerful then. What struck me at that time was how powerful she was. If a prime minister can harness the popular press in the UK they are very powerful. I am not saying whether she was right or wrong but what she started has been followed around the world. Blair in first year had papers behind him and that would have been the best time for him to take advantage and use the moment to his best advantage. We must ask if he did enough – this would have been the time for him to go into Europe – if he wanted to do that he should have done it then. He still has the Sun behind him but not all the others. The media is all powerful because it can make or break a prime minister. It made Thatcher and it broke Major and Kinnock.

Have you heard Kinnock speak on this subject?

Yes. I was on the platform with him at the IPPR fringe meeting at Labour conference last year. He unloaded himself about this subject.

Do you trust spin doctors?

A better question would be do we need spin doctors? There is no doubt that in media world we need spin doctors. In journalism we need them to help us decode what the government is doing. Such as Clause Four. When Blair announced his changes at Labour Conference years ago – no-one understood the significance of his statement till the spin doctors placed it in the context of Clause Four. We are dependent on them for illumination. A newspaper reporter today is judged on how many exclusives they get and the spin doctor has the power to give these out and to give out the information. Information is like a currency and it can be traded. Information would not be given to anybody – it is not given out at news conferences because that would be wasting a trading opportunity. So, back to your question. We have to trust spin doctors, especially as an instant journalist. You just have to trust them.

But do you?

Some don't help you and others will give you information. Alistair Campbell has mislead me on occasions. On Clause Four he denied information I had been given that Prescott had only found out about the changes the week before and made me give a correction. Later I found out my original information was true. So I have concerns about political propagandist spin doctors as they take charge. But, by and large, most of the time they may not tell the whole truth but they are not lying. But are they corrupt in the sense that the casually lie? No. But I would be wary of political propagandists as spin doctors.

In general, how would you summarise the relationship between journalists and spin doctors?

Got worse since Labour came in. There is no doubt in my mind that Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell have understood how media works. They realize it is more competitive and that journalists want exclusives. Journalists will do deals in return for access. They are complicit. They have understanding and used that. At one time spin doctors got this much more but it has changed under the Labour Party. Alistair Campbell has had a great tenure but now his authority smashed and he is on a downer. The standard of political journalism has gone down as well because you can now find more and more stories written without attribution. Even the Times has had front page stories with non attribution and this has now spread to broadcast. The danger is if you get inside the loop and get stories you will take the stories. It is getting worse. Even I did it – I would speak to one MP and then reported it as ‘rebel MPs.’ The changes allow journalists a greater chance to exaggerate. In the US they won’t allow anonymous sources to be used to give attacks on people. They have much stricter rules. The Phillis commission is concerned about a meltdown in the level of trust in government information and political journalists are part of the problem as well as we are not coming clean with audiences. I don’t think we are doing the public a good service. The standards are worsening, there is more exaggeration and more spoilers. These Special Advisors, or party propagandists, when Alistair Campbell took over, they rewrote the rulebook for Special Advisors which means they can trail information. The Sunday papers have trailers but which is the right one? When special advisors have given information it should be given to all journalists at the same time. Like the second Iraq dossier - why wasn’t it given out at the same time? Instead it was given to six Sunday papers on a plane on the way back from a trip to Washington. Alistair Campbell was asked to supply information on how the dossier was given out. If government gets on trading information, this starts a spiral of cynicism which will continue. The Phillis committee is trying to find ways to get a system to make information is right and is given out as a level playing field. But who will make the first move? My criticism of Alistair Campbell is that he has not done anything to improve standards of journalism and his tactics have made it worse and this leads to cynicism.

Have the changes in the briefing system made thing any better?

They deserve praise for that. They should get full marks. By putting the two daily briefings on the Web, ministers have showed they realize how important it is. Opening up the lobby briefings means foreign correspondents and specialists can now go.

But do they go?

Yes. And today he only asked foreign journalists for questions. The more opened up the system is the better. Most of the advice to the Phillis committee is civil service. They all want special advisors to speak on the record and more televised so you see journalists asking the questions. It would be more see through. News International is in but they only get six questions. The awkward squad were left out. Journalists should be on parade and their standards are looked at so I give credit but it should go further.

Did you feel as a broadcast journalist, you were treated differently than print journalists?

Yes. They knew we are not in the market in the same way for exclusives. Special Advisors want to get agenda setting stories into the Sundays but they understand our need that we can be complicit in order to get exclusive interviews and that we are trusted differently because of sophistication of the Mandelson and Campbell machine. Only now are the Conservatives beginning to understand this.

Did you consider yourself to be a public servant?

I had a public responsibility. Was BBC asking you to do things you shouldn’t have had to do? On some occasions I have not told the whole truth. The BBC are self-censoring and you need to understand the BBC has slightly different standards and public responsibilities as to how far you can get and working for a public organization but have never been ordered to tell an untruth. It is one of the BBC’s greatest strengths. We are still susceptible to pressure and standards and it does

not see things gratuitously and this is put into people who are public service broadcasters. Working for public organization, we have standards which are different from the rest because we are more accountable.

What is your definition of a spin doctor?

Someone who is trying to put best possible gloss on something. Rather than giving more facts they are giving more of the best of the facts which will set their case, i.e. weapons of mass destruction document by Blair. Danger comes when they gloss over the facts and mislead you. But we need spin doctors now. The broadcast journalist cannot exist without spin doctors and they know that. We need explanation and interpretation and newspapers need it too. Now we are back on trading information. The first people who understand this trading were financial people and those covering big hostile takeover and these coincided with expansion in many and they used techniques to manage the newspapers. One of them taught Peter Mandelson and then Tim Bell and brought it into government. Thatcher did it is it was because the media was so powerful. They were techniques picked up by political spin doctors but the people now with real power are celebrity PRs. Media has expanded so much that they need interviews so much that journalists are prepared to be complicit. They can now insist on 'grip and grins' where a celebrity will turn up for a photo shoot, 'grip' the product, give three interviews, one magazine, one newspaper and one broadcast, and even after this they get copy approval and picture approval. Even the BBC will be compliant and now allow product mentions. These techniques by spin doctors are now being used by celebrity PR people.

Is this not a case of dumbing down?

Question of who is ruling the roast. Financial PRs now are much more clever. They have had to be since the FSA ruling on the Friday night drop. It is ever changing. The people at the top of the tree are the celebrity PRs as they are able to have the most say. When Blair came back from the Gulf he let Peter Stothard have the book of it and then gave two exclusives with the Sun, with brilliant quotes. Trading is still happening but Alistair Campbell cannot do it so easily any more. Spin doctors know electronic media want pictures so they do the photo-op for pictures but they make them agree not to ask any questions and only have cameras. The media let this take place and let it all be controlled because they are so desperate for news.

Can you see a higher level of news coming out of this with, say, two levels, one which is short, very factual and of the highest level of trust, the other being more gossipy, speedy but less well sourced?

There would be a market for it. Turnout at the last general election was only 59% and there was a large amount of media coverage for it. The only thing which has changed is the level of trust. Broadcast journalists are trusted much more than newspaper reporters but even their level of trust is going down. But still above the government. But still beginning to go down. I did exaggerate. It is easy to exaggerate in conversation. If there is a requirement to say who sources are then we would be better but it is up to the government to make the first move. By electronic means we can get information to everybody. Simon Walker (the Queen's Press Officer a few years ago) did this. The September dossier and Lewinsky went onto the Web. This is right and it makes it harder for spin doctors to spin and harder for journalists to exaggerate. We need the government to push it.

A6.4 Interview J4

Date: Tuesday November 4, 2003

Place: Meeting room at 4 Millbank.

What are your views on the relationship between spin doctors and journalists at the moment?

The big change is with TV and radio. The most significant factor and change since our book in 1984 is the growth of 24 hour news which has affected relationships between the three sides and journalists, on who is reacting to who. But no doubt each of them play off each other in this whole thing. In my British Journalism Review article there is a Blair quote on the 24 hour news cycle and another line in all this is from James Carville from 1992 is that a politician always has to be ahead of the news cycle. As Bush says, need pre-emptive strike. It is prebttal, not rebuttal. It is to know what journalists will say so know how to react to take journalists off in the other direction because know what they are going to say. There is a battle which takes place all the time for news agenda and always a sense in mind of journalists and spin doctors that nothing is as dead as yesterday's story or news. If you can convince them they've already seen that story it works and it just a part of the process. News is new and that has been sped up 100 fold by 24 hour news. Used to be a cycle which was a great deal more leisurely than it is now. If you talk to the World at One and then Today you will find that the World at One will say they can't do what was on Today. They say they must take the story on because news is available all the time at the flick of a switch or click of a mouse. There used to be something magisterial about the news at nine o'clock and that was the news till nine o'clock the next day. Now everyone is aiming to get onto the news agenda.

What other sort of tactics did you see being used?

Alistair Campbell has a line that every story needs a full stop. He knows that every news story has a life span of about two to three days and need to give journalists something which has a full stop. An example is in the Bernie Ecclestone affair when the story was dragging on so Alistair Campbell told Blair to go on to the Today programme to get a good kicking to give the story a full stop. They gave it one last view and then the story was over and dead. All the papers got their final story on it on the Monday morning quoting Blair and then the story died after that. It was not a coincidence that Alistair Campbell had so much power for he was a former journalist. He knew the mind set and ways of the media and can think how they will do it and found ways to satisfy their insatiable hunger. I think that if we look at the conclusions of our book in 1984 a whole range of things we advocated have occurred. We advocated on the record, televised pressers and briefings on record. Before you had to piece together what had been said so as well as all the stuff about control and manipulation there is much more now in the public domain now than 20 years ago.

But we did not have the internet 20 years ago.

No, but the culture of secrecy has changed quite significantly. Used not to be allowed to mention MI5 or MI6 and for Prime Ministers Questions there were huge lists of subjects which could not be mentioned. There was Masonic secrecy. There was a whole range of things which have now become public. More widely available now with the internet but could have happened without this but it has made it more widely available.

I have asked journalists about the changes to the briefing system and many have said they have not seen how it makes the situation better. What are your views on this?

Lobby journalists are seeing things in a blinkered way. Before they did not get to talk on the record monthly with the Prime Minister. Anyone can now come along. I think it is a big difference. Lobby people want to hold onto their mystical status but now it is out into the open. On the daily briefings very important as it means something like with Hutton you have daily, on the record, statements about what the government was thinking at that time and this is a very good

counter against concealment and lying. The lobby briefings always been quite defensive because journalists are trying to breach defences but always been like that. The Lobby has never been a place where secrets of government have been handed over to the chosen few. Now you can see what that line is. The journalists are accomplices in concealment so do not want to give their secrecy away.

Are there any other changes you would like to see made?

To try and suggest to politicians and government that trusting the public with truth and answering questions and telling the real story would be a much better way of doing things. Most actions from number 10 spokesman drive you mad. They give formulations for answering questions. I still think there is a way to go. Knowledge is power. View they have is they cannot rehearse arguments till the decision is made or the media will make it look like there are splits in cabinet. If reporting was different and there was real debate going on about transport etc and the media did not hype it up and make it so adversarial then politicians maybe able to have more debate in public. Then they could be more honest but at the moment it is not and they should be more grown up on both sides.

What sort of tactics do journalists use to deflect the spin?

The definition of journalist from Nicolas Tomlin was that they must have a plausible manner, they must have a passable command of English and they must have ratlike cunning.

Basically, a great distrust between journalists and the government and spin doctors has developed more than at anytime I can remember and that distrust comes from the very success of New Labour. There is a greater mistrust now than ever been in my life time. Blair and Campbell talk of corrosive cynicism of journalists but a healthy cynicism has always been there. I never believe anyone until it is been officially denied. But it has been intensified by the activities, skills and successes by spin doctors – such as double counting. Alistair Campbell always claimed he was more spun against than he spun.

Something many people have told me is that journalists spin more than spin doctors. What is your view on this?

Could have a very strong case for saying that and journalists have had to find ways to counter the spin doctors. You can see a process of action and counter action. It is a cycle.

How would you then characterise the actual relationship between them?

It is a parasitical relationship. The two sides feed off each other. Politicians want to get messages across and the journalists want to write news and sell newspapers and political news has always been a staple because political news tells you about people running your country even if people are not interested in politics as such. There has always been a battle, especially when spin doctors are so aware of the journalist's need for a narrative (Alistair Campbell used this line all the time) and this is always an issue. The relationship is one of mutual suspicion and mistrust and it is greater now than I can ever remember before because journalists feel like they have been taken for a ride and feel guilty they have allowed this to happen. Also spin doctors feel there has been a relentless barrage of negativity so genuine achievement does not come out so they feel they have had a bad press. Journalists feel that the pudding has been over egged the whole time and both sides would claim that the other is trying to sex up their coverage. I think it does look different from Downing Street though as from the newsrooms of the Sun and Telegraph. There is lots in government that journalists miss in stories and those that care oversee it from a very different perspective. In my book we compared the cabinet papers from thirty years before with the articles that were in the news papers at the same time. There was an awful lot that was not said. There was a very big difference. In the end, if the aim of political journalist is to produce the first rough draft of history then by doing this process again now we would likely find it is not a very accurate draft of history. So much is about the battle to get the message across and get the spin across. Even if they do not call it spin. Will always be a form of spin even if it not called that. If take the

difference between telling an untruth but thinking it was right and telling a lie, knowing it was a lie, often the outcome will be the same but the principles are different. Very little in politics has a pure truth, it is too complex for that. All must be boiled down and distilled and making it comprehensible so people understand but in a way that is a form of spin. But it comes from the lack of black and white documents. Are you doing it consciously to mislead? In each interview I did I only used a little bit of the interview but I did try to represent the interviewee fairly. It is like with Cricket highlights. The full six hour match could have been very dull but the highlights will include just the best bits. Distortion of the whole but it is the compression process which is distorting it and this can mislead but it is without the intention to do so.

A6.5 Interview J5

Date: Tuesday July 8, 2003

Place: Strangers bar in the House of Commons. A Labour MP attended some of the interview and gave his opinion occasionally.

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

Very. The media can make or break a politician and they do. I will be interested to see the outcome against Hodge. Media broke Peter Mandelson and Steven Byers and Estelle Morris but not directly truly important. If look at leaked document in first administration it was a headline. It is meat and drink to them. They shape agenda as well as it affecting it. Papers shape the electronic media. They follow papers. Our only test is will people buy it? They piggy back on what we do. We are not as important as we sometimes think we are. We are not the critical mass. No amount of media will stop voters or make things happen. It was not the Sun wot won it – it was the voters wot won it. If they weren't then we would not be on our backs every day.

Do you see in differences in the way broadcast media are treated from print media?

Don't really by politicians. Most get on with them. Depends on status of journalist – not the type. No rule of thumb. Politicians favour certain titles.

Is this justified?

Yes. Tabloids are very sharp and well directed. Sense of what they want. Setting in own convictions. Tabloids have very strong ideas and not covered by politicians. Governments come and go – the media will always be there. The readers we care about – not the government.

And the truth?

Yes.

How would you summarise the media's role in politics?

We have an important political function. After 1997, the Independent went into opposition. It was not our job to run the country.

Do you trust spin doctors?

Depends. Charlie Whelan is a very close friend. Most journalists only have one source on who they have to rely. I trust Charlie Whelan and I trust Alistair Campbell and know a bit. Would not trust Peter Mandelson – he is manipulative and cruel. Would not trust Phil Bassett. Until Blair, the heads of information in government departments were trustworthy. Blair politicised them and, as the Jo Moore case showed, it did not always work.

A spin doctor may justify this by saying they are merely fulfilling the public's appetite for sped up information. How would you respond to this?

Where is the public appetite for speeded up information? Who wants to know more quickly? No public appetite for spin doctored information, only a political appetite to give it out. Its only purpose is to sustain political life of people in power.

Do you feel you as a political journalist have any skills in common with spin doctors?

I have written in the British Journalism Review about journalists going to work for the government. Cannot understand why journalists would want to work for the government. Some want the security and some are attracted by the big wages. Many were very good journalists. It is treachery. I could not do it for any government.

Do you consider spin doctors to be professionals?

Some are. Some are good at it and some are crap. The ones who are good at it do not seem to be spinning. It is like all PR. It is the nature of doing it which counts. Charlie Whelan – it was like a conversation and you could pick things out. He did not make a pitch. He was quite low key. The ones who do best fill you in and let you work out what is the important bit. The best spin doctors have a quiet approach and there aren't many of them. Don't see many of them. Do not need more. News people have the hard job to do. If one is blacklisted then you can be in trouble. Peter Mandelson is still in a strong position. He still talks to his favourites and still has his outlets. He is not as influential as he used to be in the media though.

So does the media really have the power to push certain politicians out?

Yes. They are currently trying to get rid of Hodge and Iain Duncan Smith. I am surprised they have never tried to get rid of Margaret Beckett. Most targets have gone but some can claim a truce. Blair is so important that the other people do not matter as much so the press can pick them off. Alistair Campbell still has some power at the centre but his power is very diminished.

What would be your description of a spin doctor?

Five years ago, to the public, a spin doctor was someone who fixed your washing machine. Now people know what they are. They would say a spin doctor is someone who manipulates the news they see in their newspapers and on TV.

Who has the best spin machine in the parties?

Don't even know who the Labour person is any more. Nick Wood for the Tories has a very slick spin machine. He talks directly to journalists. He is a former tabloid and broadsheet journalist. The ones at the moment do a very good job for the Tories. The Liberal Democrats go through three press officers a week. They do not seem to be able to hold onto people. Most hacks are quite old and don't take kindly to being told what to write by young people. They need more credibility. Cannot just walk in and expect to be taken seriously just because you have that job. You will only get respect from conveying the message well and understanding the history. Tim Allen was the sage in the trade. When he first came before the 1997 election he did not understand well at all. I was doing a piece on the Labour Party Conference and the symbolism used. I said to David Hill (who was chief press officer then) whether the New Labour members knew the words to the Red Flag. David Hill confirmed they did. Tim Allen then came up and said that of course Blair knew the words – he had spent all week learning them. He did not realise how much more telling this phrase was. I suspect that sometimes politicians are hiding behind their spin doctors rather than doing stuff themselves. Spin doctors get their politicians into an awful lot of trouble. They now seem to be not what they were cracked up to be – they now seem to be white albatrosses. A really good politician does not need a spin doctor. The worse ones rely unduly upon them and then they come unstuck and the politician goes down with their spin doctor. Gordon Brown does not need a spin doctor. Blair's reliance on spin doctors will be the death of him. Spin doctors have become synonymous with New Labour and lying. They have become the proxy target for the government

themselves. When the media are having a go at spin doctors they are actually really targeting Blair. The Lobby hates Alistair Campbell.

MP: Alistair Campbell takes the piss out of Labour.

Interviewee: Labour is as scheming as spin doctors. Often worse as then people were briefing them. David Hill used to brief the Sunday papers as Head of Comms for Labour.

Why do journalists go and work for the government?

It is not the same as journalists going to work as MPs or spinners going to be MPs – there is nothing glorious about wanting to be an MP. Spinning is much easier as you do not have to go out and apply for your job and get elected as MPs must.

Interviewee to MP: Why did you not want to be a spin doctor?

MP: I always wanted to be a politician.

Interviewee: They want to be politicians without going through the hard stuff to get to be a politician – they are fight shy.

To whom do you think spin doctors are responsible?

Deferential things go on now. Blair is fucked. It was over with Cheriegate. Every single player thought said it was done dirty and it caught number 10 lying. You can't spin everything. Some things are just bad.

Do you agree that they are not spinning any more?

They mainline on it. They are addicted. No rehab for spin. It is worse than crack. It would be like trying to crush their instinct. Even Blair at the liaison committee was all spinist. Spin doctors do not do the fighting – they send men to their deaths. They do not personally take part in combat yet they are better paid and can switch off when they go home at night. They want power without exposure. This cannot be respected whereas I have a lot of respect for MPs.

To whom are you responsible?

Editors and readers.

MP: Editors are autocrats.

Interviewee: No. You do not have to do what you are told. They can spike you but this only happens very rarely. I speak more to the editors in my current job than I did in all the years in other jobs. Tony Blair has asked at least twice for the editor to get rid of me. Sometimes I include the reader's letters in comments in my column.

To whom are spin doctors responsible?

Themselves, their own careers and their own ambitions. They don't have a sense of responsibility. Peter Mandelson was the best spin doctor of them all. But as a politician he is junk. Some spin doctors think that that are as important as the politician for whom they speak simply because their proximity to media gives them an undue status and they fall for it in a big way. Real politicians come from conviction – not simply from following someone else's ideas and this is the flaw of spin doctors. Grandly speaking, spin doctors come a cropper.

A6.6 Interview J6

Date: Friday June 27, 2003

Place: Conducted in a bar in Farringdon

Overall, what is your view of the relationship between spin doctors and political journalists?

It is a culture of unattribution. There is also a narrow definition of spin doctors. There is a culture of lobby briefing and unattributable quotes.

Is it new?

The phenomenon is older but people such as Joe Haines were not spin doctors. Most would say it has grown from being press officers into a culture of unattribution which means people are unable to trust like with the dodgy dossier. It is however, more open than it used to be. In the 1980's, Bernard Ingham was only allowed to be described as the government spokesman, now there is a detailed briefing from the daily press conference on the web and the briefers are known as The Prime Minister's Official Spokesman. In my day to day work, I did not go to the Lobby as I feel that it is a lousy system, but it is not clear that a better system is easily available. The alternative is for press officers to only to give fully attributable information but then they would be more cautious and less information would be given out. It is a trade off. If journalists could print only information for which they had named sources there would be fewer lies in the media but there would also be fewer truths. The problem is that there is no penalty for political journalists who get stories routinely wrong. They simply shrug it off and move on. There is no incentive to check things out properly. Journalists often stretching trust and not attributing. If they had to be more meticulous, it would be very time consuming. Now papers have grown in size and the staffs have contracted, staff journalists have to provide many more words and have more work published. 30 years ago when I was working on a Sunday paper I had to produce one or two pieces a month of about 2000 words. Now I would be expected to do that one or twice a week. The information also has to be produced faster and so spin doctors are in an ideal position to feed that appetite. There can be far fewer in-depth investigations (unlike 'State of Play') and stories on this scale would have to be published as they went along.

What are your views on democracy and trust in this new media age?

YouGov recently did a poll on the way trust was perceived in the UK and even separated the types of journalists. Broadcast journalists came higher than broadsheet journalists and much higher than tabloid journalists. Media has got a lot worse and there is much more dishonesty and distortion and this is bad for democracy. Democracy requires the flow of information you can trust. It is not so much that people are bamboozled by information but that people see through it. They know lots of information is dodgy so they end up not trusting anything they read. A Sunday Times poll last autumn listed lots of government achievements but most people thought that these things had not happened – although they had. This cynicism has led to low turnout which is a big concern and damaging democracy. At one level people reading the Sun know it is full of bollocks but they have no idea what they can believe. Spin doctors are more sinned against than sin. I have never known them to tell him an untruth. They may be selective with some information but if a something is a fact then in my 30 years I cannot think of a situation where they have lied. There are strict codes governing the way they work and I have found them to be unimaginative but not dishonest.

There is a description that says that press officers work 'over the line' delivering 'official information' and that spin doctors work 'below the line' 'massaging' that information. Do you agree with this definition?

Yes. In Gordon Brown's first spending review the special advisor got in touch and span the story, the press officer called to give the specialist information. I have talked to Alistair Campbell many times and whilst I have known him to hold information back, I have never known him to lie and if

he had it would have been very silly. I have never known a press officer rubbish a rival minister of another department except on one occasion. A spin doctor will do this. A lot of the Brown/Blair bitchiness has come about this way and the information on this in the papers comes from their spin doctors.

What characteristics do spin doctors and political journalists have in common?

An obsession with politics, government and information.

What are your views on the professionalisation of political communicators?

Political communication has professionalised but compares it unfavourably with other professions such as journalism or medicine where to be a professional means you have a higher standard of training or an authority to admit someone to your profession. In political communication this professionalisation means there has been a debasement of political communications. The job requires the person to make a message uniform. The more professional political communicators become, the more people get turned off from politics because they begin to spot the bogusness. This in part is why turnout is falling. The more professional a politician, the less the public likes them. The public have now taken to Mo Mowlam, Clare Short and John Prescott because they are less professional. The professionalisation of politics is about putting more and more obstructions between reality and the public. It has come about in part because the appetite from the media for information and in part because there are now more channels. In this situation, demand for interviews is higher and they must be shared between different ministers. In order to get the message across and to show they are 'singing from the same hymn sheet' they must learn to say the official lines given to them. If they did not do this a journalist would spot the differences and turn it into a 'Government split over...' story. The whole system conspires towards uniformity.

What needs to change?

We need a culture in which we accept the fallibility of politicians as humans. The government has become oversensitive. If the government were to let politicians be more spontaneous it would be better than the way it is now.

Is it in response to the way Neil Kinnock was treated?

Yes. When he was a backbench MP he was relaxed and humorous. When he became the leader he began stilted and awkward because he was terrified of making mistakes and becoming even more vilified in the press. He has a reason to be bitter.

What are your views on gatekeeping in the media?

Spin doctors and ministers and special advisors (information arbitrators) have more time than the routine political news making journalists due to the appetite of the media machine. There is not a monopoly though as lots of sides trying to influence what gets onto the news: opposition, opinion formers, single issue groups.

Who else would be useful to talk to?

- Michael Brunson
- John Sergeant
- Nick Jones

APPENDIX SEVEN – POLITICIAN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**A7.1 Interviewee P1**

Date: Tuesday October 14, 2003

Place: The café at Portcullis House

As a journalist before entering politics, and during your time as an MP, do you consider that there have been any significant changes in the political media landscape since Labour came into power in 1997?

Yes. It is now not what you do, but what you say. There has been an enormous increase in PR people in every department and working for the party. A lot of people were transferred from opposition into government jobs. New Labour isn't about drastic change but cautious and in the middle of the road and reversing Tory messes and this means we need more spin to tell people things have changed and to pretend the government has done more. But it is part of a larger trend anyway. The system is now less party stuff. Now, as the parties have shrunk, the job that parties do is not done and so it must be done through the media instead and so must try to influence media and so need government information officers. It is not a question of right or wrong but inevitable and any government wants to put across what it is doing. We just need to do it very much but Alistair Campbell is brilliant. Tony Blair will be lost without him. He is not grown up enough to go out on his own. He needed Alistair Campbell. Blair is an actor, he is a brilliant explainer and persuader but he thinks words presume actions and Campbell was very effective as an antidote to this to explain to all and not just the middle classes. Campbell had a strategy of divide and rule. No opposition at the moment so have the press instead and the press are taking on the role of the opposition. Press also do job of political parties. Each newspaper is a party in itself as it reflects its own constituency of readership. That means after the honeymoon they began to become more critical. Alistair Campbell anticipated that and saw how important it would be to keep Murdoch press on Labour's side and by dividing the main Thatcher papers he managed to keep the middle classes. He wanted them on side enough to give concessions to the Murdoch papers and courted the Sun and kept Trevor Kavanagh at the heart of things and pushed down the Euro issue. That means the Sun which was so against us with Kinnock is now more positive. If we had that harassment now Blair would be in lots of trouble. The divide and rule strategy is working. I am a little confused why they have alienated the Mirror though. Spin doctors like Campbell do not manage stories – he does strategic management of the media. It is strategic management of the media. The mistake was to launch war on the BBC because they fought back. Alistair Campbell was responsible for Hutton. Spin doctoring itself is exaggerating and reiterating achievements and this has produced a jaded reaction. Every government announcement was made eight times. We have just overdone it. If you have nothing to say, blame it on the spin doctor.

Do you agree with commentators who say that the reason Hutton happened was because the BBC, and Today in particular, have become tabloid?

There is a lowering of standards. Politicians get less time in the mainstream media than they used to. TV programmes know they cannot do head to heads any more so now use commentators much more instead. Less use of politicians. Less political programming on mainstream television now. Only Panorama and Newsnight now but the others are gone because they are audience losers. There is a lowering of standards perhaps but Radio Five Nearly Live does quite well. But all these trends have gone on but very few people watch political programmes. I do not blame the BBC for what has happened, nor ITV but there is a decline in political coverage. For minority audiences there is still lots of politics so those who interested they are well catered for. Politics for the masses is falling but cannot force it down people's throats. Newspapers now have much less foreign stuff and politics has gone to celebrity culture. I do not think debasement of politics by the BBC which caused Hutton. It was Campbell's response which caused it.

Do you any views on whether this increase in press officers means they are sidestepping Parliament?

Always been the case. When we introduced the Parliamentary channel we thought more people were watching but this has not worked out. But if you want exposure you go through the media. Parliament is for ventilating issues, the press is the power and it is the intermediary. Whether it is right or wrong, it is better going through the media than going through Parliament.

Has it always been like that?

Yes. Was with greater respect then though. People are hostile not to Parliament but to the parties. People do not like the party system but that has always been the case.

Have the tactics used as you on a journalist in the 1970s changed at all?

I do not think they have. The main thing is access. Now there are more controllers controlling access. Most TV programmes want to get ministers. They need ministers to take stories on. If they cannot get access then there is not much you can do about it. That is the weapon most frequently used. Ministers will always do an interview if it is in their interests and they have something they want to say or a story to tell. Ministers are also better media trained now.

Do you see any problems with the civil servants and special advisors roles have merged?

I don't see any problems. The more special advice the better. We should have the French system. Civil servants are there to do what government wants them to do and put over the government's case. And do not see any harm in giving special advisors civil servants role.

Who are journalists responsible to?

Their readers. And the truth. Job is to uncover the truth. There is a tendency to hype and accelerate and they live by shocking and to exaggerate but that is just part of the game. Hype built into the media and that is why they are successful and they have the ear of the people and politicians do not. That is the basis of the love hate relationship but we need them to reach the ear of people and the fact they are less obliging just indicates their game is more competitive. We have too many newspapers.

To whom are politicians responsible?

I am responsible to the people of [constituency]. And my political conscience. To what I think is right in the eyes of the people of [constituency].

To whom are spin doctors responsible?

The leadership of party because they try to put over our case. Spin doctor is a mindless emotional word: news managers or press officers is better. Now more of them but Joe Haines was much the same. Campbell was the best there has ever been but someone has always been there but opponents now pick it out as a black art. Because media have become more important than Parliament and party then the government must use them – they have to learn to use both. This is just a shift in the balance.

A7.2 Interviewee P2

Date: Wednesday October 15, 2003

Place: Interviewee's office in Portcullis House

I am looking at the trivariate between politicians, political communicators and journalists. What is your view on the relationship between the three?

Generally there is nothing new about having favourable presentation and it goes back to representing Oliver Cromwell and probably long before that and it is just how it is done and the news media spin everything. The same event or speech will be presented by the media in different ways by different branches of the news media to set their own agenda so more government presentation is needed to accommodate that. They varnish the truth and always have done but more now than there used to be. Labour's biggest mistake was to boast about it. As the saying goes, you can't be a successful poisoner and a famous poisoner and the same goes here with spin doctors. Maybe the change is that spin doctors used to be content with having power in the background and now they want the acknowledgement of possessing that power too. In earlier times Bernard Ingham was successful at pushing this too. He made Thatcher seem as if she was going out into Europe and would bash them all with her handbag but she hardly ever did this. Nothing new and goes on all the time. It is a reasonable response to the media. But the biggest problem is that the BBC has an agenda and will pursue that agenda rather than report news and their agenda is that politicians never tell the truth. When John Reid went today to open the fourth new medical school since Labour came in, doubling the number of doctors the NHS will have, the BBC sent people out to find damaging stories not covering it as it was, a good news story, something to celebrate.

They would argue that at least they are against all politicians not just Labour ones?

It is not their job to be against anybody. Their job is to report the news.

When did this decline take place?

It has got much worse over the last 12 years.

Why?

Because they are up themselves. Do you know Henry the Fourth part one? It includes a speech from Hotspur after the battle of Holmedon, saying 'but for these guns, I would have been a soldier'¹. And the view from the BBC and many of the papers is that 'but for these parties, they would themselves be running the country' so this is their mindset. The worst thing now is now the news headlines are so sloppy. They get things such as GM crops and GM food mixed up.

Do they need to stand up more?

No because the last few Director Generals have made themselves more important. At one time people would have been satisfied with being behind the scenes but know what to be known as well.

What about your own dealings with the media?

Franklin said you should never have a quarrel with men who buy ink in barrels. I agree with this but am not good at sticking to it. I don't live up to it! They are there to manipulate us and we are there to manipulate them. Out role is always to tell the truth because you will find out otherwise,

¹ The exact quote is from Act 1, Scene three and reads: "and but for these vile guns, He would himself have been a soldier."

or if you don't you ought to. They are very open to spin. At the Labour Party conference they are fell for the line the government gave out on foundation hospitals.

Why? Because it is easier?

Yes. It is so they do not get out of the agreed line between them. Adam Boulton from Sky once told me that if he came back from a presser and went on air with information he would get asked by his bosses why it was different from the line PA were putting out. The Parliamentary sketch writers are just as bad and will get together in a group and decide what the story is. And when journalists come away from a Downing Street presser they will get together to decide what they heard!

So one conversation can have a major effect on society and democracy?

Yes.

So is this a problem with the Lobby system?

Yes.

How does this effect the image of politicians in society and the media's role in democracy?

The constant attacks on politicians are very damaging to society. The only saving grace is the people think journalists are just as bad as the politicians. With that quote on whether we would rather have a press without government or a government without the press I am on the side of the man who would rather just have a government. Another problem with the news media is the writers of think pieces. They say politicians do not think long term so when we do they say we have taken a u-turn. They want us to be quick with reactions but sometimes giving a couple of days longer to think through properly would be good. There is a frenzied desire among journalists for the latest story which is most damaging.

Why? Due to 24 hour news?

Partly 24 hour news. It is a desire for instant response when thought would be more useful.

Have you been spun against?

By the media, yes. If anything is tried in the NHS there are a number of papers, and even the BBC now who will try to harm it. With the Y2k stuff, with the biggest bit of spin ever for computer problems. The BBC had seven or eight correspondents walking around hospitals trying to find something which had gone wrong. In Italy they ignored the problem and nothing went wrong. Our society is vulnerable to this spin and much of it is also commercial and NGOs, people seem to think NGOs are above this but they can be very vociferous. They have got very good at it but it seems to most people as if it is just the government doing it.

Have you been spun against by your rivals?

No. Not that I have noticed. But then I hardly ever read newspapers. I tend to find if I am in them someone tells me. I am not saying there aren't good journalists, there are, but they are in the minority.

To whom should journalists be responsible to?

Their editors but being responsible to the truth would be a good idea every now and again. I heard that editors are supposed to sort the wheat from the chaff and then publish the chaff!

Who are you responsible to?

The people of [constituency] and the [party] in [constituency]. And I would say my conscience but as I am not religious I'm not sure I have one.

Who are spin doctors responsible to?

Whoever pays their wages. There is nothing wrong with people employing people to present their case in the most sympathetic way they can. It can go wrong if it goes too far and no-one believes them. This government (except for the odd occasion) has not been given to more presentation than any others. I am not very fashionable on presentation stuff though. I just give the unvarnished truth. I do not think the government deceived people deliberately and I have never knowingly deceived the public.

A7.3 Interviewee P3

Date: Wednesday July 9, 2003

Place: The tearooms in the House of Commons

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

Hugely important. They do not set the agenda but they do influence it enormously. But the public are not gullible. The media tend to be more influential on other topics other than politics but they do influence it. Most journalists are scrupulously careful about how they report things. On the Alistair Campbell and the BBC issue I think it is all hot air but they set the agenda. It is hypocritical as politicians can set agendas but they are not always in control of where it goes.

Do you trust political journalists?

Would I lend money to them? No. Nor would I buy a second hand car from them. They have their own lines. You have to know how to play the game. Politicians can set direction but the journalists get to take the story on you so you are in their hands. If they want to do you over they can but if they do it too much then won't talk to them any more. No politician is 100% happy with what journalists print but most accept freedom of the press. They have a job to do and most put faith in them.

Do you trust spin doctors?

No. I think the difference between attributed spokespeople is politicians do not have too much time so they need someone to speak to the press on their behalf. But the top politicians rely too much on spin doctors. The difference is with policy and spinning work that they are showing contempt in a grown up democracy. But the public are getting fed up of culture of spin doctoring. The public are canny enough and they will smell a rat from a mile off. Blair has been more accountable than any of his predecessors but now he has been saddled with this bad reputation. John Major and Margaret Thatcher would never have appeared in front of the Public Liaison Committee but his obsession with spin has ruined him. They just cannot help themselves not to control the news agenda. I would scrap spin doctors and ask politicians to talk to journalists themselves. Why can't top politicians be available to answer questions everyday. Whilst journalists would initially ask stupid questions trying to catch them out, eventually they would ask the right questions to the right politicians on their own topics. They would not need to be saying anything new, that had not already been told to Parliament, but they would be making themselves much more accountable.

How would you summarise the relationship between politicians and spin doctors?

Incestuous, unhealthy undemocratic and too powerful. Full of scepticism that they cannot tell the truth and won't tell truth. Just a bad thing.

Can a spin doctor become a liability for their politician?

Yes. In Jo Moore's case, she should have promptly resigned. She had never been elected. She did not understand the bind between the politician and the electorate. They live in ivory towers and this goes to their heads. Politicians are the accountable ones so if their spin doctor distorts the truth and it damages the minister then they should resign. There are a coterie of people who are part of the project. They are a 'cancer' of the government.

Which political journalists do you rate?

Mathew Parris, Peter Riddell. Most of the broadsheet parliamentary sketch writers. They are exceptionally talented people and they have a great eye so the public can understand. Broadsheets sometimes get too caught up in Westminster Village life but they do understand the system very well.

Are there any spin doctors you rate?

No. Most are shadowy anonymous people. They flit in the background. Never want to be the story but they are happy to put in the knife into anyone else. This is why they are poisonous.

Do you consider spin doctors to be professionals?

In their own way. Professionals but very lousy. They are like the women at the guillotine in France, sitting at the side knitting whilst the royals were executed. They do their job well but they are not honourable.

Who do you consider to be the gatekeepers of political news?

It is still journalists to a large extent but with the Internet they can get information from more sources. 20 years ago there were four TV channels and the broadsheets. Now there is a massive amount of news coverage and Internet. Sources are not that accountable. Still are good journalists and still have powerful people because of that. This is why there has been a flurry of small groups because they can get information and organise very very quickly. Politicians not aware how far behind they are, partly because they try and control it too much and partly because they are not awake enough.

How much contact do you have with the media?

Locally: every day. Regionally: fortnightly. Nationally: there are splurges. For three or four weeks there will be nothing and then lots.

Since you joined Parliament in 1997 are you aware of any changes in the media's role in politics?

Politicians are more streetwise now. Many came in so cocky but now realise cannot dismiss Parliament so easily. Brazenness has been replaced by menace. No longer would you get the Charlie Wheelan's spilling the beans in the pub in the way the spin doctors did then. When they think about how they can twist journalists they take it from the mentor Alistair Campbell who was a thug at times. But not quite as false.

Do you feel the growth in spin doctors has damaged democracy in the UK?

It is corrosive, damaging and needs some radical action. Won't come from this government they rely too much on spin doctors. Need a cultural change and to let go so we can start to connect better with the public. When did a politician last say sorry and mean it? 100 years ago they had honour so that when they, or someone in their department, made a mistake they would fall on their sword. From the 1960s this began to change. Now no one has done this in at least 20 years and

this will be the way to win back confidence of the public and political journalists. Such as with Margaret Hodge. The press will not let go when they see that there is more to a story. The quickest way to kill a story is to say it is true. Politicians have not grasped that yet.

A7.4 Interviewee P4

Date: Thursday July 3, 2003

Place: MP's office, 1 Parliament Street

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

It varies. On the whole if politicians did not see any media it would not make a big difference. But if role of the politicians is to know a little bit about a lot of things then they need to watch/read the media. But they should not worry too much in their own field. Basically it depends on what media you are talking about. If media in general and you are trying to change culture then it can be used and viewed very effectively. With the example of drink driving. The amount of drunken driving decreased rapidly following a media campaign – not on Radio 4 or in the broadsheets – but on Radio One. They made it culturally unacceptable and this message filtered out successfully. When the purposes of media and politics overlap they can be very successful together.

Do you trust journalists?

It varies. With someone like Anthony Bevin I would trust him never to use a story that went against the Government. Other journalists such as Michael White I believe have never knowingly written something which is wrong. Some journalists are tied to a particular politician such as Michael Gove. They can get too close to their subjects. Most journalists are just doing their job which is to make available to all what is available to a few.

Do you trust spin doctors?

I don't know the party spin doctors any more. I would trust some, but some wouldn't. I know some departments, such as the DTI, would never say anything untrue but those working for groups such as select committees are much worse.

How would you summarise the relationship between journalists and spin doctors?

Mutual back scratching. Shared wartime experience. Alcoholic. Vicious. Journalists working for government. Alistair Campbell bullies journalists. A spin doctor only needs to bully once, but if it successful this puts fear into journalists and before long they will automatically write without offending you.

How would you summarise the relationship between politicians and journalists?

Varies. A lot of MPs have no contact with journalists on a national level but may well have good relations with the local press. It often depends on who they grow up with. If they are at school or university with people who go on to become journalists they will have better contacts. Most of it is chance. Whilst I was Roads Minister I joked with a friend about launching a new policy that roads would be longer, wider and taller. The friend, [journalist] on the [paper], was short of a story so used the story. Another way of building contacts is through campaigning. Once a journalist gets involved in a campaign the MP / spin doctor can get them onside. I had a case involving a constituent who is in the USA on death row. I got to know two journalists who also have an interest in the case and the three of us have often work together campaigning on it. Some journalists though I would not trust with a bargepole.

Do you consider journalists to be professionals?

Yes. And the amazing thing is how little they earn. Not the big names but the day to day journalists are on very little.

Virtually everything that is true appears in the media but not everything which appears in the media is true. I have had two bad experiences with the media reporting about me things which are not true and both times I sued. Neither stories were mistakes – they had been planted. I have also phoned the editor where stories have been misinterpreted.

How would you describe a spin doctor?

There is a spectrum. I guess it is someone who is deliberately employed to influence and manipulate the media coverage of person or campaign.

What tactics do you use to influence the media?

When I became transport minister I was warned that an embarrassing report was about to be published and was asked how they should hide it. I said that they would not hide it and instead set up a press conference to publish it. A few hours before the press conference a spin doctor phoned all the news organizations invited and told them that this would be a publicity stunt for [interviewee]. It worked and only one journalist turned up for the event. If you do want to get a story out leave it in a photocopier.

Does that really happen?

No comment! When the Conservative leadership campaign was going on I was on the side of John Major. John Redwood's team hung out around the committee room whereas Major's team hung out with the media. As soon as the results started to come out Major's team were able to give a reaction and slant the story their way. The earlier you can influence or comment on the story the more effective you will be. With the William Hague leadership elections, I slid into a press conference and suggested a few questions to a journalist. These questions exposed flaws in the opposition support and prevented the contestant from being taken too seriously.

Do you consider spin doctors as professionals?

Some are, some aren't.

Would you consider journalists or spin doctors to be the gatekeepers of political news information?

On the media production side: the news editor or the programme editor. Some political news is pre-planned and some is not so the pre-planner can be important in this. Events are obviously important – Diana or September 11th are prime examples. Also quality of the story. And good journalists get good stories. How journalists pick up stories because whilst most are given, some are observed. Some spin doctors want to get information into the media and some want to keep information out. Alistair Campbell plays in the Westminster Football team. In football some know the rules and stick to them, some know the rules and break the ones they can get away with, and some don't care as long as they win. Alistair Campbell is one of the third group. A lot of it spin is running people down as the public are more interested in the bad news. I and the media, were joint gatekeepers. Whilst I was roads minister I watched a That's Life show and saw a piece on child restraints. I picked up on their campaign and began a joint campaign with That's Life. We then managed to get a bill through which mandated those with child restraints in their cars to use them on their children. The information about the importance of the restraints went through the media and the politician and it came at no cost and was very effective.

How often do your comments appear in the press?

Haven't got a clue. Less now than used to. It does vary. Appeared a lot following my comments on Elizabeth Filken – I was all over the place then. I also did lots of media work at the time of John Smith's death. I heard the news early on, gave the PA advance warning that he had died before the official announcement and also gave them a comment so they would have something to wire out as soon as it was officially announced. I then went over to 4 Millbank and did eight interviews in quick succession. Last year though was reasonably quiet.

Which groups do you see as having the most access to the news agenda?

In general, the rule is that if you are not there in the beginning then not much happens but the story will usually be followed up so if you make sure you have a comment to 'move the story on' then you can "surf the wave" of publicity. If a story has to be covered then you can dictate how it is covered. After a car crash in my constituency I went down to the crash scene and spoke to the journalists there telling them it was likely it was a horrible accident, but not that the people were drinking or being reckless. This is the angle that was covered in the press and this was the inquests conclusion too – it meant the family were spared the pain of hearing speculation that it was a self induced accident. In covering stories a spin doctor can effect who gets to comment. You should also get your comments in before other agencies so that you get to set the terms of engagement – not them. You can also use interviews for other purposes. You can make more general points in a very specific interview. Basically, as well as deciding which stories to cover, the gatekeepers get the raw information from lots of groups and must decide which experience is true.

To whom are journalists responsible?

Their boss, themselves and their own standards, opinions of colleagues, bonds of friendships – I've been told by journalists before that they have been 'instructed to knife you'.

To whom are spin doctors responsible?

Their boss. Their own judgment.

To whom are politicians responsible?

Depends on what sort of politicians they are. Some it is to their place in destiny. Constituents. Ought to be national interest. Fundamentals: Human Rights, Religion. Responsible opportunism. I call myself a benevolent wasp. I use my time going to lots of parties where I meet people who will be able to help me with my constituency issues and charity events. The purposes of politics is to reduce unnecessary handicaps and improve well being. It is about getting people to do things in a different way to make things better. I attend charities, meetings, debates, events, drop ins, all party groups and 4/5 party invites a night. I consider myself to be a community telephone exchange. One in ten things in politics actually matters.

Who else would be useful to talk to?

- Mark Fox, Mail on Sunday
- Dr Tristram Hunt

A7.5 Interview P5

Date: Wednesday September 10, 2003

Place: MP's office in Portcullis House

What are your views on the relationship between politicians, political journalists and political communicators?

There has been a huge transformation in the relationship between the three. There are three reasons for this: To some extent it is a consequence of professionalisation of communications by political parties. Secondly the growth of the news media and electronic media and 24 hour news business and thirdly there has been a watershed moment in 1997 because of an understandable drive in the Labour Party to deal with what Labour perceived to be a right wing media agenda and thought this would put up a barrier to Labour winning elections. So it is a mixture of evolution and transformation which were brought us to the position we are now in. Now we are in a difficult place which it is impossible to row back from because we cannot see how political parties should be expected to do anything other than present in the best possible light what it is trying to do. With the big public corporations they would not be expected to talk down their companies whilst they were looking for investment. They, in order to keep their share prices high, expect to say things in the best light. The government should be able to do the same. So the idea of having no spin is absurd. The comparison between sleaze (with the Tories) and spin is wrong. Getting rid of sleaze was always needed so it was right it should go. But spin is not the equivalent of sleaze. Spin seems to be synonymous with communicating and it should not be. You should not tell people things that aren't true but you should not say that the government must get rid of spin. We actually need even better communication.

What are your views then on the roles of different communicators: special advisors, civil servants and press officers?

The growth of the media has led to more people being needed to deal with the media. The old civil service did not have the numbers or the ability and could never have coped with today's media. And now with a more specialised media you need a specialised army of people to communicate with. The media and special advisors have taken on that role. The problem is where some give political advice and some give media advice and there is no separation. Hutton has thrown the mirror up and will take a snap shot of the situation at the point when the dossier was written. It will be interesting to see what comes out with but it would be good if it came out with a good prescription for better media, press offices etc. It will give a better analysis of what can go wrong. But it always comes back to integrity. And also to media absurdity. Like shouting at government for hanging Kelly out when that is what they are doing themselves. Kelly said it in piece himself; he was not a completely innocent victim. He had put himself in the spotlight.

So how does this fit into your views on sourcing?

One of the problems is that the government has not made the full transition in means of communication from opposition to government and occupation of government. With them communications comes above effective parliamentary government. Decision to leak in advance is down to parts of the government trying to place the government in the best possible light. We have disarmed the role of parliament and unleashed events which spiral out of control. If use media rather than parliament then you take away parliament's role as scrutiniser. Select Committees are changing this. Whilst people bemoan the diminishing power of the main chamber there is a growth in the power of scrutiny of the committees. Andrew McKinley was doing his job and one of the things which will be unfortunate will be any diminishing role in the select committees to ask hard questions. Who should have been at the Foreign Affairs Select Committee? We should not reign back scrutiny of the select committees as it is where democratic government in this country finds its defence. MPs have tried to make select committees stronger as a reaction. Government has allowed select committees to grow and Tony Blair sits twice a year in front of the PAC. What is happening now is the attempt of parliament to move focus out of the TV studios and back to

parliament. Not John Humphreys but MPs are questioning. What is the media trying to do? Set stories or report them? The Times used to have a Hansard page. Media trying to set agenda and this is tied up with selling newspapers, TV programmes and advertising space. If you look at the main news stories you see there are lots of crime stories. Used to be more of a cross section. Need a balance and a level of responsibility. If ask most parents whether the streets are safer for their kids now most will say no. They will say they are more dangerous – and yet the figures shows the streets are safer. But crime stories dominate papers and so the image is that these crimes have risen, rather than just their levels of media reporting and prominence of coverage. The media need to have more self restraint. Balance in media between broadsheets and tabloids is strong. Broadsheets which 20 years ago felt they should be the on the record against sensational news has fundamentally shifted. The Times sees competition with the Daily Mail not the Guardian or the Telegraph.

But isn't this because of the ownership?

It is because of the selling and the drive to cut into the Daily Mail's market. Chicken and Egg situation. This is what the public want but if one focuses their appetite on sensationalism the public will then want more.

Is there any blurring between special advisors and civil servants?

Old demarkation between civil servant doing civil service work and political advisers is really blurred in the last few years but not just in the Labour Party. Conservatives tried to do this for years. Bernard Ingham did the same. There might be a quantitative difference but not a qualitative one.

So who is the gatekeeper?

The idea of a gatekeeper is araic because the flow of information is 24 hour, garbage and out there. So much of it is emails governing stuff and people can get easy access. The gatekeeper is an individual's ability to use a computer. You cannot hold this tide back. Cannot control it. This is fanciful - that is gone. The gatekeeper in terms of the media remain the journalist because a good journalist will uncover it and reveal it and increasingly get the tools to do that. It is a ludicrous claim by the Tories about communication is that he demonises characters but they would give their right arm to have an Alistair Campbell. They wanted someone to do what Peter Mandelson did for the Labour Party. The fact they cannot find anyone means that they feel if they have to be handicapped then both sides should be handicapped!

What about David Hill?

He is very experienced in media, PR and the Labour party. He knows the party like the back of his hand. He is very different from Alistair Campbell which is good but it will be a little hard to draw comparisons. Alistair Campbell is very close to the Prime Minister. David Hill will have that but with knowledge of the Labour Party as well. He is very straightforward.

Do you believe that journalists should be watchdogs on the government?

There should not be an obligation for this. Good journalists do not tell lies. Good journalists should be free and when they expect politicians to be honest then they should be too. Andrew Gilligan made it seem like something sinister had happened and this was not correct. There is a standard expected at the BBC which justifies the governments concerns with this report. Government should have complained about the BBC. Journalists expect transparency and openness from MPs and journalists should do the same. It would be very interesting for government to see what journalists get paid. And who they spend money on. The public does not trust journalists. Does the BBC tell the truth? Do spin doctors tell the truth? Good split but if you ask the public about 25 professions then journalists and politicians would be found in the bottom five. When journalists tell politicians to clean up their act it is a one way street. British politicians

have much more integrity than in the rest of Europe but you wouldn't think so if you read our newspapers. All MPs want to make things better – they wouldn't be there if they didn't but newspapers do not show this. Most journalists earn more money and have more power than a back bench MP.

Are these changes affecting democracy?

My feeling is you do not know what you have got until you lose it. We take our democracy and freedom very much for granted. Where you do not have it people give their lives for it. Our biggest challenge is apathy and disenchantment with the political process but this is not a given. If we can see a really big difference between political parties you will then get a huge turnout. The media should want a role in that but it is up to the media to decide if they want a role. Media have a huge power but there is a responsibility which goes with that and it is significant and media need to take the responsibility they have. Saying that they are just doing their job by reporting is the same as 'I'm just following orders' and MPs have to go back and say vote for me and all they have is to sell newspapers and figures and they can just follow the lowest common denominator: like crime stories or celebrities. They do not have to do that but they do it because it sells newspapers.

A7.6 Interviewee P6

Date: Wednesday July 25, 2003

Place: In MPs office in Portcullis House.

How powerful do you consider the media to be in relation to politics?

The media are extremely powerful politically because the convergence between the political parties means that issues that are political in nature are now much less distinct. In the past press could examine views but now are confined to examining different interpretations – this makes the press much more important. Plus, there are too many papers in the country.

Do you trust political journalists?

Lobby journalists for the most part. But it is a broad definition. Between politicians who want to do things and those weaving a web and politics is about both. For the most part, the lobby could be trusted except when it suits them to behave as lackeys for Number 10. Beyond the lobby correspondents, some journalists in show business and some in accurate reporting but in this country electronic media are so good the press became less a factor of events and more opinionated, gossip and attitude. In the US the press are more impartial.

Do you trust spin doctors?

They have a job to do but think the greatest error of judgement to allow Alistair Campbell to become a civil servant. A civil servant should be an individual who would be equally acceptable to any political party. He has the wrong degree of authority over civil servants so balance is constrained. In a democracy the communications team in each department should give equal access to all parties and they should not be so partisan. The idea that a political party funds individuals is fine but they should not be funded by the state.

How would you summarise the relationship between journalists and spin doctors?

A spin doctor should be able to give the minister spin interpretations. They should not be able to have the sort of bullying tactics we have seen since 1997. We certainly should not have journalists being blackballed. It is a Stalinist approach and entirely improper. We need to distinguish more between spin doctors and the heads of information departments. Maybe Heads of Information

should be able provide information on a freer basis. When Conservatives were in power, the Head of Information was more powerful than the Special Advisor not the other way round as it is now.

How would you summarise the relationship between politicians and spin doctors?

Spin doctors should never be civil servants and this is what is so inappropriate and wrong about Alistair Campbell. Politicians like spin doctors when helpful and dislike them when unhelpful. Peter Mandelson had a whole art form of painting pictures. As a spectator you can watch this with wry amusement, to be close to it however and to see information manipulated is quite alarming. There have always been spin doctors and people who presented events in favourable ways. Is now though being done with menace. It is unacceptable.

How would you summarise the relationship between politicians and spin doctors?

I avoid them. I like the establishment and officials. Many politicians believe, and rightly so, that they must use journalists to get people interested in a subject but all politicians need to know how it works. For politicians to complain about journalists is like sailors complaining about the sea.

Would you consider journalists or spin doctors or politicians to be the political gatekeepers?

It is a process. Initially the officials involved are the gatekeepers, then the spin doctors and how it is presented and there are times spin doctors can spin but cannot get it to lift off. Again it is like sailing. Depends on where the wind will take you. Same with spin doctors – if there is not an appetite out there for your story no one will cover it – this happened with the Pensions issue in 1997 when the Tories tried to raise it. I was told by the editor of the Times that he was “not taking any stories from the Tories.”

Did spin doctoring change after 1997?

Yes entirely. Once a party is good in opposition it is not fit for government. Once a party is good in government it is not fit for politics. In opposition, the Labour Party were only good at creating stories. They were a very tight band who worked together and did not trust the Labour Party or Tories and were very suspicious of civil servants and so had to spin. Major came unstuck and civil service management did not want to resist party with such strength so Labour brought in all this spin and have come unstuck but they have deeply changed the relationship between civil servants, politicians and the press.

Who sets the news agenda?

Number 10 remains extremely powerful. Frequently read newspaper articles which you know have come from a handout. In Tory government the media was opposition group because government were not giving out information in advance of giving it to the Commons. I hate to judge whether the Tories lost because they lost the battle with media or just because they ran out of stream. Now starting to see Parliament become more important again and select committees. So, who sets the news agenda? It varies.

Who is the least partisan?

The Financial Times and the Economist. All the others are comics, gossip comics. Telegraph is fairly straight. I am shocked that the Times has become so partisan.

To whom are journalists responsible when carrying out their job?

Editors. There are however still journalists who have high level of integrity. Michael White (Guardian) Matthew Parris and Riddell are all not for sale. And the BBC have many who are impeccable. Neil Dickenson is brilliant. The world is becoming more grown up about what they

are trying to do. Ministers have huge power and without some correction it will be easy for them to become very out of order and arrogant.

To whom are spin doctors responsible when carrying out their job?

They are not sufficiently accountable. Journalists are accountable to the PCC, their editor and their profession. A spin doctor, depending on who paying is almost out of control. Such as the case with Jo Moore and Martin Sixsmith. If a spin doctor is put into a department then they should be answerable to that department's permanent secretary. But who has power is unclear. Spin doctors frequently articulate their own minister's perspective so often they become responsible to Number 10 who will then clamp down on them.

To whom are politicians responsible when carrying out their job?

Officially their electorate. Politicians care about their public reputation and in our Parliament which is stable and long term the politician reputation in Parliament matters. Spin doctors come in for a presidency. Civil servants and politicians are there long term. If a politician does something wrong, they will be reminded about it on a long term basis. A spin doctor can be much more ruthless. I have been very upset by it all.

Can you suggest anyone else I should talk to?

- Richard Sheppard
- Barry Sherman