British politics: the role of the media

Gv 311: British Politics course,
Lecture 15 Lent Term 2014

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Today’s lecture

• The function of media in a liberal democracy
• the historical context of UK political journalism
• The problems facing UK political media

Next week:
• How political journalism is changing
• The impact of media change on politics
• The end of the public sphere?
What does journalism do for politics?

- **Information**
  [facts, records, statistics, events, policies]

- **Deliberation**
  [debate, analysis, comment, opinion]

- **Accountability**
  [investigation, audit, voice for citizen, campaigns]
The Fourth Estate

“There were three estates in Parliament. But, in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sits a Fourth Estate” (1787)

Edmund Burke 1729-1797
FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2013
COUNTRIES WITH NOTABLE DEVELOPMENTS

KEY TRENDS
- Intensified efforts to block new media
- Media openings in West Africa and Asia
- Press crackdown in Mali and Guinea-Bissau
- Economic crisis weakens press freedom in EU

In 2012, only 1 in 6 people lived in countries with a free press.

www.freedomhouse.org
History of news: a battle between press & power

- Inns of court
- Holborn printers
- Covent Garden coffee houses
- Fleet Street national newsrooms
- Broadcasting – public and commercial
- Old Street – Tech City
The problem with political journalism is..?
The (politician’s) problem with political journalism is..?

• Unaccountable power
• Bias
• Obsession with process
• Cynicism
• Lack of information
• Lack of expertise
• Loss of local press
The (journalist’s) problem with political journalism is..?

• Lack of resources for (political) journalism
• Government secrecy
• Government and party spin and manipulation
• Disintermediation: increased role of social networks & public relations
The (public’s) problem with political journalism is..?

- Too complicated
- Too cynical
- Too belligerent, biased
- Too much process
- Boring
- Irrelevant – ‘Westminster bubble’
- Too simplistic
- Not critical enough
- Too complicit – not critical or radical enough
- Sensationalist
- Not informed enough about realities of policy-making
Press power?
Triumph of spin?
Leveson’s verdict

- Politicians “developed too close a relationship with the Press in a way which has not been in the public interest”

- Regular political journalism was "in robust good health and performing the vital public interest functions in a vigorous democracy,"
The paradox of political journalism

“The unshackled and irresponsible press sometimes gets it wrong, but I still prefer it, warts and all, to a shackled and responsible one”

Simon Jenkins

Would you trust them to tell the truth?

Ipsos MORI polls 1983-2013

Percentage of respondents answering yes:
- Doctors
- Clergy/Priests
- Politicians
- Journalists
- Police
- Ordinary Person
Real problem is engagement, attention & authenticity
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