

ARE OUR MEDIA  
THREATENING THE  
PUBLIC GOOD?

## Are our media threatening the public good?

*"I do believe this relationship between the media and public life is now damaged in a manner that requires repair. The damage saps the country's confidence and self-belief; it undermines its assessment of itself, its institutions; and, above all, it **reduces our capacity to take the right decisions**, in the right spirit for our future"<sup>1</sup>*

*Tony Blair, 12 June 2007*

A free media has long been regarded as the cornerstone of effective democracy. But there is now – not for the first time – concern that the triangular relationship between government, media and the people has turned bad, with a cautious government and a strident press locked in a game of mutual destruction that creates bad policy and alienates the public. The topic was deemed so important that Tony Blair decided to take it on in one of his valedictory speeches before standing down as Prime Minister in summer 2007.<sup>2</sup>

This is a report on three private seminars, held under Chatham House rules, at the Institute for Government under the chairmanship of Professor Anthony King in autumn 2009. People with experience of communications inside and outside of government were brought together to discuss the current state of relations between the media and the government, and whether there was any scope for improvement. The seminars have been supplemented by some Institute for Government desk research.

### What does the problem seem to be?

Seminar participants saw problems in the current relationship between government and the media. Government representatives felt that Whitehall was better at media management than in 1997. However, one journalist participant thought that centralisation of media management through No.10 had undermined the relationship between departments and specialist correspondents.

Participants agreed that Ministers focus on a very narrow section of the media, dominated by the national press, as filtered through daily press cuttings. These, plus the Today programme – which fed off each other – were seen to set the “national agenda”. In contrast, relatively little attention was paid to the regional press, online media and broadcast media more generally. Departmental press cuttings were often the lens through which Ministers and departments viewed the media, and these gave a highly distorted view of what was actually making news.

Ministers often felt their agenda was driven by the media. The Westminster-focussed media impacted on their authority – it affected their influence with their colleagues in the Cabinet, their reputation in the House, and their standing in their department. Therefore they feel big pressures to respond to media developments – and to respond quickly. At the same time, Ministers attached real importance to cultivating key commentators in sympathetic newspapers whose opinion was valued

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<sup>1</sup> Our bold

<sup>2</sup> The Phillis review, published in January 2004 looked at what it termed the breakdown in trust between government and media. It made recommendations about the organisation of government communications, including the creation of a new Permanent Secretary post for Government Communications in the Cabinet Office. However, it is clear from our seminars that Phillis has not changed underlying concerns about government and the media.

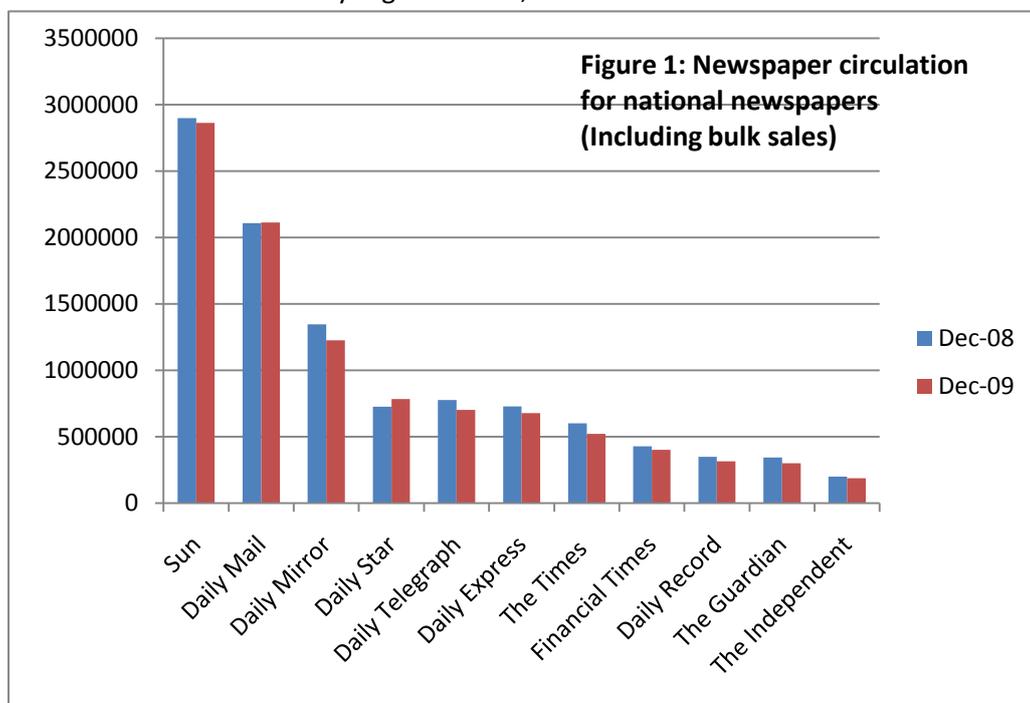
by their peers. Other pressures came from No.10’s constant demand for initiatives and announcements, which meant that announcements were often made before the policy was ready and were driven by the need for a short-term action headline rather than by a longer-term policy imperative.

There was particular concern about the role of the media around issues involving risk and uncertainty, which led to potential distortions with significant public impacts. Newspapers’ role in propagating the Wakefield “research” on MMR that led to many parents refusing the triple vaccine for their children was a case in point: vaccination rates fell below critical thresholds which led to an upsurge in measles cases. More recently, reports of a girl’s death after a cervical cancer vaccination attracted big headlines – failing to mention the girl had an undetected tumour at the time. At the same time, big but less salient risks like diabetes or road traffic deaths receive less coverage.

***The media under pressure***

Evidence suggests that traditional media are under increasing pressure, and this is likely to compound the problematic relationship between government and media. This has been documented extensively elsewhere. The key trends are:

- **Declining circulation** for the print media – with associated commercial pressures. Over the year to December 2009 nearly all national dailies lost print circulation. The exceptions were the Daily Star, which saw an 8% increase by cutting its cover price to 20p, and the Daily Mail, which managed to hold steady. There has been an even sharper decline in the regional media with a 10% average circulation fall over the year to September 2009 threatening the continued existence of many regional titles;



Source: ABC, December 2009

- Consequent **reductions in staffing** – fewer specialists and fewer experienced journalists. One participant described the media as bifurcating into “elite” and “niche” journalism, and

impoverished mass media. Interestingly, in the US, foundations are now funding public interest investigative journalism;<sup>3</sup>

- The requirement to **feed more outlets** as print media and readers move online. The biggest online titles – the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail – now chalk up some 30m unique users each month online, with over half overseas.<sup>4</sup> No one has yet established a viable business model for online media, and it is clear that the public grazes on online, reading through multiple titles rather than being prepared to ‘eat a meal’ it will pay for;
- With fewer staff and yet more copy to produce, the media have arguably become more dependent on **ready-made sources**: the press release, the PR handout, the press agency, the “Rogue Expert”;<sup>5</sup>
- The media has increasingly turned to a **campaigning-style** to bring readers in – as conventional news is broken in a timely way online or via broadcast media. The headlines of the tabloids are now dominated by opinion-driven takes on the news rather than “the news” itself;
- These opinion-driven headlines in turn strongly affect the **broadcast agenda** – one interviewee described the BBC news editors’ suites as the biggest consumers of newspaper headlines in the country.

*When the Sun creates the news in this way, this is then followed up by Sky, which then puts pressure on the BBC to follow suit. And I think this has wider implications for the election, which, in my view, is of wider public concern”*

*Lord Mandelson, on the Today programme, November 2009*

### **A sceptical public**

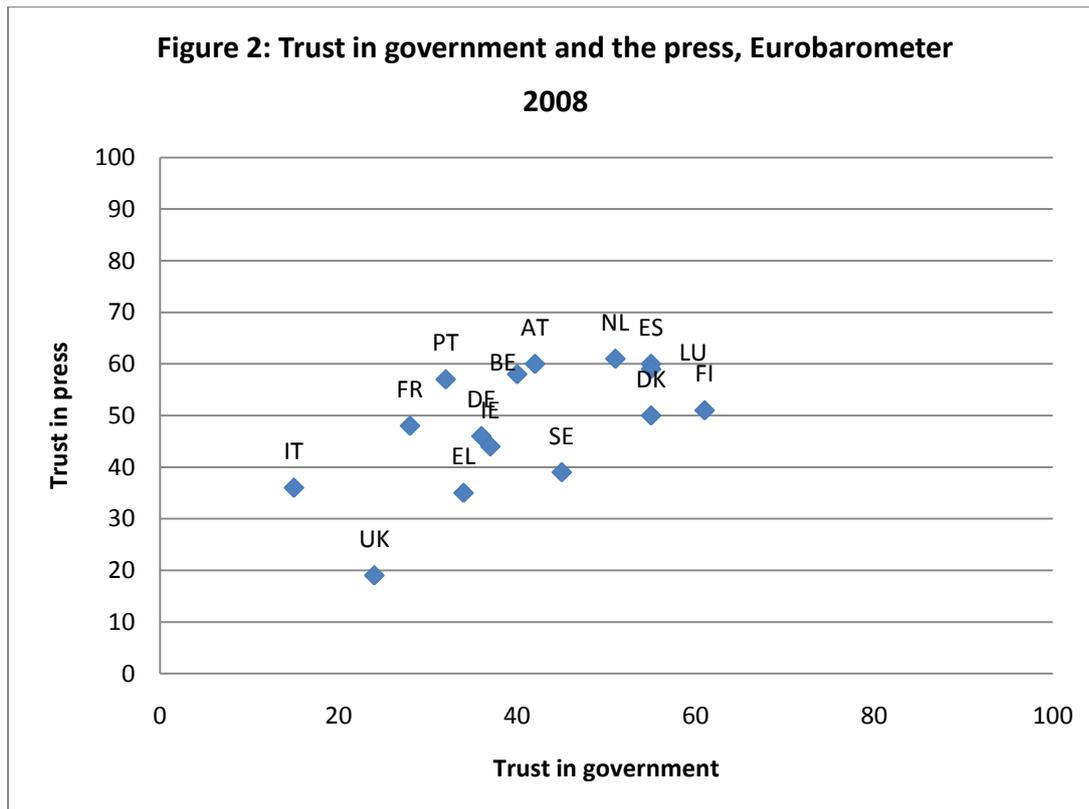
Although almost 10m people still buy a newspaper every day, people say they get most of their news from the television. The profile of those who buy newspapers shows a very stark gradient. There is a sharp drop in readership among under-35s, who do not look to print as a source of news. At the same time, the capacity of commercial broadcasters such as ITN, Channel 4 or Sky to do much in-depth coverage is increasingly attenuated by financial pressures. The effect is to make the BBC – and what one participant called the “BBC world view” – increasingly dominant with little chance for the public to access alternatives.

The British public are pretty sceptical about both the media and our political institutions. Figures from the 2008 Eurobarometer poll (taken before the recession was really underway and before the MPs’ expenses scandal) put the public’s level of trust in the press (not differentiated) at 19%, compared to 24% for national government. This makes the UK a real outlier benchmarked against the EU-15, and the only country to have a lower level of trust in the press than in national government. This is not a new phenomenon. In 1997, trust in the press was even lower at just 15%.

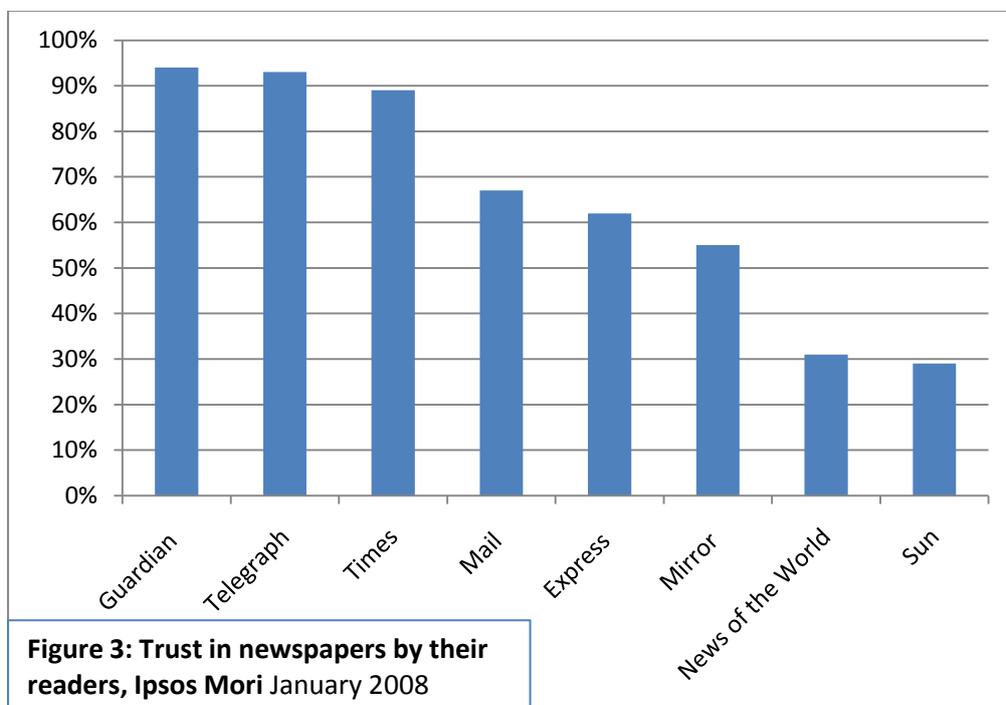
<sup>3</sup> Pro Publica. In October it was reported that the NY Times had run a Pro Publica investigation in its pages for the first time.

<sup>4</sup> Source ABCe

<sup>5</sup> See eg Nick Davies, Flat Earth News, Andrew Currah, What’s happening to our news, RISJ, January 2009



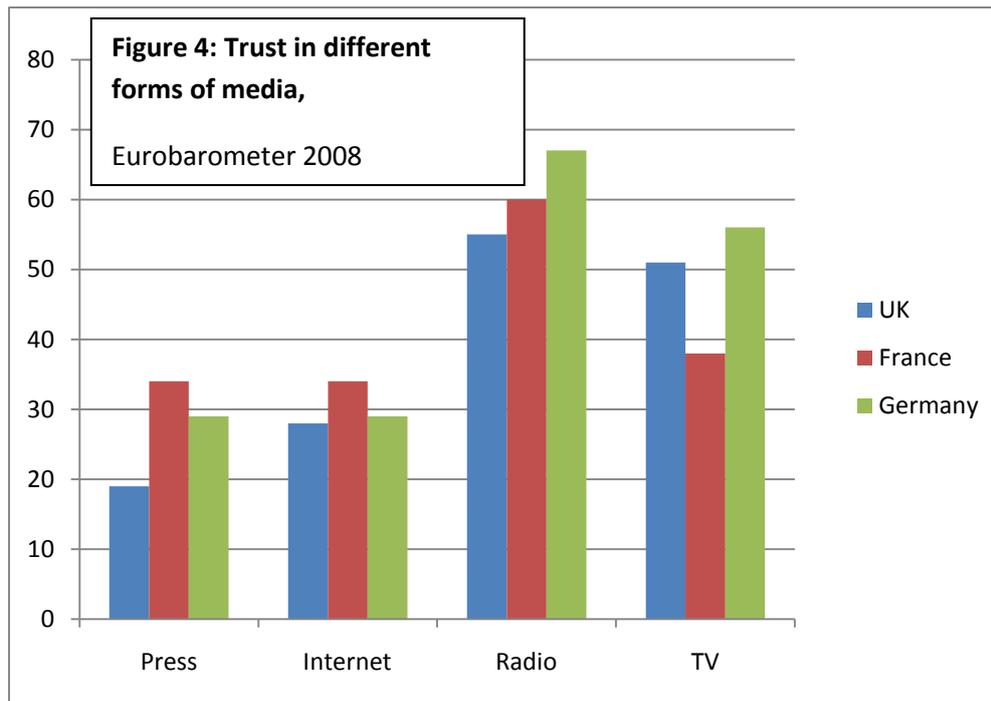
Other polling suggests there is a greater lack of trust in the mass circulation tabloids. An Ipsos Mori poll for the BBC in January 2008 showed that amongst those who had read a newspaper in the last two weeks, over 90% of Guardian and Telegraph readers trusted their newspapers to tell the truth, while only 29% of Sun readers did.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Includes Sunday editions of Telegraph, Mail, Express and Times

The paper that dominates Whitehall concerns – expressed in our seminars but also in Whitehall conversations more widely – is the Daily Mail. A quick survey of Daily Mail headlines in November 2009 shows the majority of headlines were highly critical of government policy and delivery of public services and the social condition of Britain. Headlines also had strong underlying theme of hostility to big business on behalf of customers (in particular, oil companies and banks). Indeed, there were very few positive headlines – either about the Opposition or more generally.<sup>7</sup>

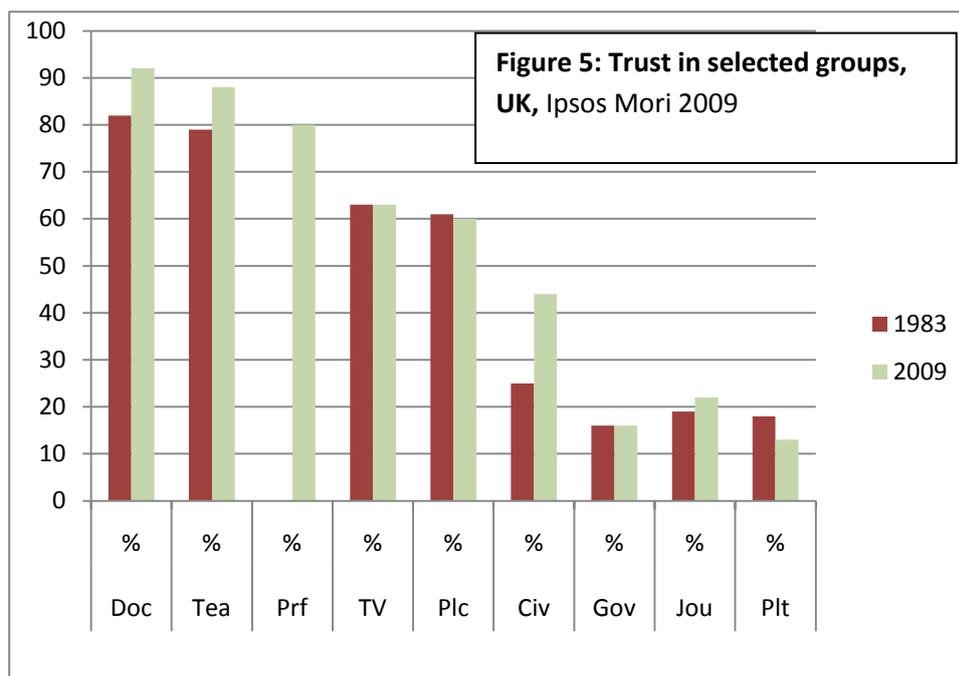
Trust levels in radio and television are significantly higher than in the print media – at 55% and 51% respectively. But, even so, they are still lower than in many similar countries.



Source: Eurobarometer, 2008

The 2009 Ipsos Mori veracity index shows politicians (plt) and journalists (jou) locked in a struggle for bottom of the table position. But this battle has been going on for a least the last 25 years, as polling data from the early 1980s, shows (see figure 5). This could just reflect a healthy degree of British scepticism and lack of deference towards establishment sources of authority – or cynics might say it represents a fair judgement of the trustworthiness of our institutions.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.mailwatch.co.uk](http://www.mailwatch.co.uk) which posts headlines front pages from the Daily Mail and Daily Express



Participants in the seminars thought it might be interesting to investigate the reasons for this sort of British exceptionalism, including what peculiarities of the British media market might have conditioned the type of media we have. However, there was not much appetite for the deferential German media, the uncritical French press or the more overtly partisan style of Fox News in the United States. For seminar participants, the sentiment seemed to be “we might be bad, but we prefer where we are to where others seem to be”.

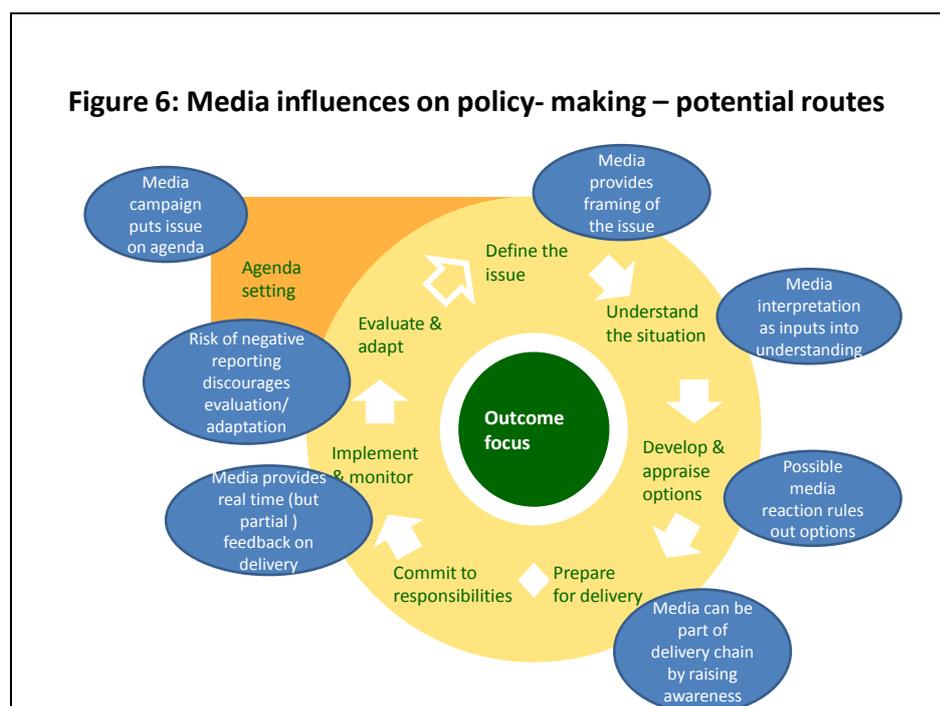
One explanation for the UK’s exceptional position could be that our newspapers rely more on impulse buys which drive a competition for eye-catching headlines, whether about politics or celebrities, compared to other markets – Finland, Sweden and Japan, for instance – where most distribution is through pre-committed subscription. The first two countries score high on trust in both the press and government, but they also score much higher on more general trust issues. But somewhere like Spain has a predominantly kiosk-based market, but also one dominated by quality papers and sedate headlines, and still scores at Scandinavian levels, or above, on trust in the press. What is clear, looking at the virtual kiosk below, is how much more emphatic the headlines are in the British press than in the continental or mainstream US press. (The NY Times has turned worthy but dull headlines to an art form, but El Pais’s headline is quite prosaic too (“the government offers more cuts to the markets if the deficit does not reduce”) given the current Spanish economic situation). A hypothesis that would be worth testing is that more competitive newspaper markets, like that of the UK, with less stickiness in readership (a public more willing to impulse buy and more ready to change the paper they buy, rather than buying on subscription, or sticking firmly to one title) encourages more striking headlines – in terms both of size and stridency – and that this in turn reduces trust in the press.



**Figure 7: Selected front pages from the same day in February 2010.** What is notable is how large the headlines in a UK broadsheet (the London Times) are compared to similar newspapers in other countries. But even this is dwarfed by the size of the headlines in the Daily Mail, where 90% of the front page is taken up with the headline and celebrity photograph.

### Does it matter?

Research is less clear about whether newspapers actually influence their readers' thinking or reinforce their existing views and opinions. There are two potential routes of influence. One is by putting issues onto the agenda, or by affecting the way in which issues are framed and discussed. The second is taking issues off the agenda – either by defining them as “unthinkable” or deterring Ministers from commissioning evaluations. But the relationship is now all one way – the media also play a critical role as part of the de facto delivery chain for a number of policies which depend on public awareness. The potential routes of influences are set out in the diagram below – and as that shows the impact can be positive or negative.



Looking first at agenda setting, some evidence suggests that immigration is one area in which press coverage tends to influence views – and contributes to the UK expressing more concerns about numbers of immigrants (which tend to be radically overestimated across the whole population) than other issues. Kirsty Milne notes some impacts in the areas in which the newspapers actively campaigned in 2000 – whether on fuel prices or the need for a referendum on the new European constitution<sup>8</sup> and it is clear too that health scares have had impacts with parents refusing vaccination for their children<sup>9</sup>. Recent campaigns, supported by the media but also reflected in Parliamentary pressure, have led to reversals on various issues, such as troop equipment, the right of Gurkhas to live in the UK, and taxation of childcare vouchers. It is also clear that the Daily Telegraph's expenses stories have already had far-reaching impacts in forcing government and Parliament to act. This suggests one route by which the media influence the political environment and, through that, policy-making – through identifying (and amplifying or manufacturing) public concern on an issue and reflecting it back into government. In terms of outcome, Ministers may be influenced by the media, even when it is unclear that the media is influencing the public.

<sup>8</sup> Manufacturing Dissent, Demos, 2005

<sup>9</sup> See for example. Ben Goldacre, Bad Science

***The problem of war***

*Seminar participants noted that war was a particularly difficult issue for governments to deal with in the media – and in particular to get the tone right. The UK strategy in Afghanistan had not been communicated effectively enough, leading to low levels of public confidence. Looking at two instances of intervention in the Balkans, Piers Robinson<sup>10</sup> tested the so-called CNN effect and concluded that media had an influence when the executive was “uncertain” about what it was doing. Thomas Eisensee and David Stromberg<sup>11</sup> concluded that decisions on humanitarian aid in the US were conditioned by amounts of coverage – with similar disasters attracting differential amount of support from USAID depending on what other major news they were competing with. This of course implies there is any coverage of foreign news – one of the big impacts of declining news budgets is to further constrain foreign coverage, which in turn increases the discrepancy between the BBC and other media.*

The second route by which the media influence policy-making is by taking issues off the table and branding them “unthinkable”.<sup>12</sup> This is obviously not a fixed category. But the adversarial attitude of the press, meshed with our adversarial political system, makes it very difficult for Ministers to admit they were wrong given media screams of “U-turn”. This makes Ministers wary of commissioning and publishing evaluations of policy impacts and even reluctant to commission research that could feed critical headlines. Studies of countries that have taken outlier paths on key policy areas – whether prison policy in Finland or drugs decriminalisation in Portugal – suggest they have put in place strategies to manage potential media reaction that might risk the sustainability of the policy in the face of hard cases. This is done largely by depoliticising the process and technocratising the issue.

This only represents one half of the picture. Governments are also crucially dependent on the media to *transmit* key messages out to the public. The media have played, for instance, a valuable role in alerting people to what they needed to do in the face of a potential swine flu epidemic – and are regarded by government communicators as having behaved very responsibly in the way it reported both the issue and the government’s response. But the way in which media reports news can also condition public response, particularly to issues around risk and uncertainty. This is made clear in the literature on behavioural economics which discusses the source of such biases.<sup>13</sup>

***What can the government do now?***

*“It is not the Home Secretary's job to be popular or to please whatever media campaign happens to be on the go; it is the Home Secretary's job to uphold the law – to look at things carefully and make the right judgment. That is what I have done”*

*Alan Johnson, House of Commons, 1 December 2009 (topical question on McKinnon extradition)*

The discussion above suggests a rather hapless view of government as a victim, buffeted at the whim of an irresponsible press. One seminar participant thought that all that was needed was for

<sup>10</sup> The Policy Media Interaction Model: Measuring Media Power During a Humanitarian Crisis, Journal of Peace Research, 2000

<sup>11</sup> News Droughts, News Floods and Disaster Relief, Quarterly Journal of Economics, 2007

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of Bachrach and Baratz’s definition of “non-decision making” (1963) defined as the “practice of limiting the scope of actual decision-making to safe issues” in Michael Hill, The Public Policy Process (2005) p.32

<sup>13</sup> A summary of these effects is contained in the Cabinet Office/Institute for Government report “MINDSPACE: influencing behaviour through public policy”, January 2010. One particular effect is salience which leads people to overestimate the likelihood of big one-off events which are easy to visualise.

Ministers to show more “spine”, and that they could then see off the media. Journalist participants commented that the media have most respect for politicians who do stick to their guns rather than play to the media. This suggests that politicians’ concerns about short-term reputational impact of standing up to the press may be misplaced – at least among commentators.

But the seminars also suggested that, even within the current media environment, there were ways the government could help itself create space for better, more reflective policy.

The first is more use of direct communication and more openness on data. Digital media make this much more feasible than before – and the *Making Public Data Public* project is designed to make available far more government data to enable people to make up their own minds about issues. In the US, the *State of the USA*<sup>14</sup> website is being funded by foundations a way of making public data more digestible. Government websites can provide a wide range of unmediated material – and increased use of podcasting and video allows direct communication without editorial selection. The Audit Commission’s One Place<sup>15</sup> is the nearest the UK comes to this, in terms of bringing together a comprehensive overview of services in a local area. Of course, direct communication can go in the other direction too – whether through the conventional means of correspondence – or through new techniques such as petitions on the No.10 website. 90% of these petitions attract only a handful of signatures over their lifespan – and are clearly relegated pretty quickly into the rejected box. It is quite notable how esoteric and local many of the subjects seem to be. But a few take off and get

responses that change the course of government action (usually if they are married to a campaign in Parliament and the press as well), notably the rejection of road pricing.

When seminar participants discussed specific issues around risk and the communication of scientific information, , the *NHS choices* website was singled out as a website that was both attracting a very high level of traffic (6-8m visitors a week) and was also, through its “Behind the Headlines” feature, providing a place to rebut poorly founded stories in the media (see box). The FCO Newsroom’s blog – called Views on the News – provides a space for the FCO to comment on running news stories and put out its own interpretation of events.

A related option is to use experts rather

#### ***What is Behind the Headlines?***

*Behind the Headlines provides an unbiased and evidence-based analysis of health stories that make the news.*

*The service is intended for both the public and health professionals, and endeavours to:*

- *explain the facts behind the headlines and give a better understanding of the science that makes the news,*
- *provide an authoritative resource for GPs which they can rely on when talking to patients,*
- *and become a trusted resource for journalists and others involved in the dissemination of health news.*

Source:

<http://www.nhs.uk/news/Pages/SirMuirGraysBiography.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.stateoftheusa.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/audit/CAA/Pages/oneplace.aspx>

than politicians to communicate. Figures such as the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Veterinary Officer and Chief Scientists can be more credible spokesmen on issues of risk and uncertainty, and such figures have been increasingly used in issues of public health, animal disease outbreaks and climate change.

Concern was expressed at the seminars that too many press officers, whom government departments rely on to communicate complex scientific issues, do not have the right backgrounds (being mainly humanities graduates) to deal with such issues. It was felt they should be equipped to be more comfortable in dealing with issues of risk and uncertainty. But against this viewpoint it was argued that in the departments where this is a big issue – Department of Health, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and Department of Energy and Climate Change, for example – press officers were quite accomplished at handling such issues. Any lack of knowledge (or inclination) was more likely to lie at the journalist's end – compounded by the decline in the number of specialists. The Royal Statistical Society had experimented with the insertion of a statistician into the Times' newsdesk for six months to help journalists interpret statistics, and the Reuters Institute had also laid on training to help improve statistical literacy.

Various participants mentioned the post-MMR experiment with advance background briefing of editorial teams on the reporting of risk – but views differed about how successful that had been. One participant in those briefings at the BBC argued that they could, in part, explain the responsible line that the BBC had taken in the case of swine flu. However another participant, who had seen the briefings from the government side, was more struck by the lack of receptivity in most of the media (with the exception of the BBC). What was clear was that the appetite and ability to absorb briefings differed considerably across the media. This was broadly characterised as the BBC willing and able, ITN and Sky willing but not really able to take on advance messages (and Sky wanting to turn it into an instant story to justify attendance at a briefing), and the Newspapers' Publishers Association unwilling even to take part. Nonetheless, participants agreed that discussing topics with editorial teams before they became news had the potential to improve the quality of public debate on complex issues.

One of the impacts of much media reporting is to put government on the defensive and to make it feel compelled to provide an instant response. Seminar participants looked with a degree of envy (but a few with exasperation) at the long period of reflection President Obama granted himself to work out his forward strategy in Afghanistan. Participants thought governments could be bolder in refusing to be rushed into instant reactions, to allow time for more considered responses. They noted this had worked in the case of Ruth Kelly under pressure on criminal record checks on paedophiles – but only because the government had defined set the timetable for response and thus taken control of the space from the outset<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, participants thought that Ministers needed to realise that increasingly the “personal is political”. As the policy agenda moves into lifestyle issues and behaviour change, the personal

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<sup>16</sup> Interesting that in his media speech, Tony Blair went to some length to decry the possibility of this – contrasting with an earlier style of politics: “In the 1960s the government would sometimes, on a serious issue, have a Cabinet lasting two days. It would be laughable to think you could do that now without the heavens falling in before lunch on the first day”

choices Ministers make are a matter of public interest and are legitimately reported by the press – who are very ready to jump on any whiff of hypocrisy in government. Thus any attempt to reassure the public on the safety of MMR was undermined by the refusal of the Prime Minister to say whether his young son had had the triple vaccine. In such circumstances, the personal stake of journalists in the story, affected as parents as well as professionals, is important to an understanding of how they will react to a story.

### ***Can the 'rules of game' be changed?***

From the government side at the seminar there was a feeling that the game the government and the media now found themselves playing was one in which both parties were potentially losers – and there would be benefit in trying to change the relationship going forward.

As a starting point, Ministers need to ensure they get a better feel for the actual mood of the country – rather than having it filtered through the distorting lens of a departmentally selective set of daily cuttings. That suggests having a digest of headlines of lead broadcast stories, key web issues and supplementing this with alternative sources of information – from polling to greater use of deliberation. One government communications director at a seminar said that on many issues opinion polling showed a clear alignment between Ministerial priorities, media priorities and public opinion. However, on another issue there was a clear chasm between what the press thought was important, and the attitude of the public.

One participant saw a new administration as a potential opportunity to redefine the relationship between government and the press. In 1997, the main agenda had been around professionalising – and centralising control of – government communications. Ministers coming into government for the first time could use that opportunity to set some different ground rules – to get away from the presumption of instant rebuttal and to develop a more authentic and less spun voice. Part of that would be through a greater willingness to expose genuine options to the public, and making clearer the thinking behind policy decisions. The scope for a returning government changing the rules of the game while in office might be more limited. However, an experienced communications professional at the seminar emphasised that very few people would be interested in the analysis that led to decisions: what mattered for public reaction was getting the “tone” right, so that the government appeared to be managing the issue in a way that the public was prepared to endorse.

One specific early test any post-election government will face is of its ability to communicate difficult messages to the public as it seeks to build a public mandate for the upcoming fiscal consolidation. This was identified as a key issue at a recent Institute seminar<sup>17</sup>. Previous international experience underlines the dangers for government in issue-by-issue attrition – with media mobilisation behind a series of hard cases which the government then reacts to one by one. Ministers will need to have a clear plan to engage the public in the overall shape of a comprehensive consolidation plan, including not only the allocation of cuts between departments, and groups, but also between tax rises and spending reductions. Although public opinion has moved considerably in recent months, substantial numbers of people still believe either that cuts can be avoided entirely, or that reductions can be

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<sup>17</sup> Tackling Tougher Times, Institute for Government, 10 December 2009 and earlier seminars on Fiscal Consolidation (see [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk))

achieved simply through cutting out “waste”, with no impact on jobs in the public sector or private sector contractors.<sup>18</sup>

The government can help itself by being more transparent about the way in which decisions are made. One difficulty on contested areas is that the certainty that Ministers want to claim to underpin decisions in an adversarial system is often hard to reconcile with the shades of scientific or economic opinion. Government might benefit, at least in terms of communicating with experts and professionals, by being more willing to expose these shades of opinion in expert groups – and then making clear the wider policy drivers that underpinned the specific choice they made. It used to be argued that the publication of the Monetary Policy Committee minutes, revealing differences in opinions within the committee, would unsettle markets. But this is now regarded as illuminating the way the Bank makes decisions and is seen as helpful. Some participants thought it was a mistake that a condition of involvement on many government Advisory Boards was silence in the public domain. With more than 400 such bodies, this inadvertently stifled well-informed debate, as it meant many leading experts serving on those bodies could not join in and thus missed an opportunity to promote better public understanding and better policy. Some of these issues are addressed in new guidelines issued by Lord Drayson on the use of science in government.<sup>19</sup>

The government so far has made tentative steps into the area of more direct communication – with some limited blogging and the use of more instant rebuttal such as the health and FCO examples set out above. There is scope to take these efforts further and make their use more widespread. However, as they become more widespread, the normal controls on printed departmental communication – that they have to be signed off in a communications directorate and by a Minister – will have to be bypassed to allow more instant comments. This will mean both more use of experts, writing on their own authority, but also potentially more exposure of senior civil servants.

This may also be part of a wider redefinition of which parts of government activity are – or should be – regarded as being politician-led, and which are regarded more as matters of technical expertise. In some areas, taking issues into a less political, more technocratic, sphere has improved the ability to have a serious debate over options. Thus the creation of the Climate Change Committee has moved discussion on how to meet the UK’s climate change targets into a more technical and less contested space, although final decisions remain with Ministers. Similarly, interest rate decisions have also been largely depoliticised. Even bodies such as NICE make relatively few highly contested decisions on treatment availability – though Ministers have been tempted to intervene in response to media reaction to NICE decisions.

Beyond the narrow confines of how government and Ministers communicate lies the wider set of issues of the market and regulatory framework within which the media operate. Seminar participants emphasised the importance of the BBC’s role in acting as a relatively neutral transmitter of news to the nation, but also expressed concern at the emerging BBC hegemony in areas where

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<sup>18</sup> Ipsos Mori, Public Spending Monitor, September, 2009. 75% of those questioned agreed with the statement that “making public services more efficient can save enough money to help cut government spending without damaging the services the public receives”

<sup>19</sup> Principles on scientific advice to Government published for consultation, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 15 December 2009

other media were exiting. It was suggested that retention of public service broadcasting remains an important ingredient in ensuring a quality debate about public issues. They were concerned that it would be undesirable to have to choose between more regional coverage on other channels eg ITN and the BBC's ability to support independent foreign coverage.

One participant called for a "better right of reply". It was argued that the Press Complaints Commission seems not only to fall short on its stated remit of giving access for personal redress to individuals without resort to the law, but to have no interest at all in standards of press coverage. Ofcom, which has a much wider remit, constructs its ability to intervene around whether actual harm has been caused. As revealed in its adjudication on the Great Climate Change Swindle, Ofcom also interprets its remit quite narrowly – to concentrate in the harm to individual reputation, but declaring itself unwilling to adjudicate on whether a misleading representation of information impacts on public policy debate. Finding a way of balancing freedom of speech against the ability to

*The accompanying Ofcom guidance to the Code explains that "Ofcom is required to guard against harmful or offensive material, and it is possible that actual or potential harm and/or offence may be the result of misleading material in relation to the representation of factual issues. This rule is therefore designed to deal with content which **materially misleads the audience so as to cause harm or offence.**" (Emphasis in original). Ofcom therefore only regulates misleading material where that material is likely to cause **harm or offence**. As a consequence, the requirement that content must not materially mislead the audience is necessarily a high test.*

*Extract from Ofcom judgment on the Great Climate Change Swindle, July 2007*

give the public a more accurate overview of the state of knowledge, and giving the regulators a role over misleading as well as offensive and individually harming material, could be a way of mitigating this. This goes well beyond what the current system of press self-regulation might be expected to deliver. Further impetus for such a shift came from current concerns in the scientific community about the use of the UK's very expansive libel laws to gag critics of shakily founded and commercially driven research. This suggests a case both for looking at Ofcom's remit and for looking again at the self-regulatory system for the press, as well as overhauling our libel laws.

The final set of issues is about the nature of the UK media market and its interaction with the

British way of politics. The "Daily Mail" style of politically opinionated mass circulation paper seems to be a peculiarly British phenomenon – not replicated in other major markets. It is not clear why this model – which is highly regarded, if not liked, by other journalists for its very successful formula – has not translated into other national markets. The British style of media seems to be a function of our highly adversarial politics and centralised government, compounded by a sense that Parliament is too weak or reluctant to hold the government meaningfully to account – a vacuum which the press and television / radio interviewers can then fill. This means that most debates have a party political angle to them and the government is held responsible for all issues from the war in Afghanistan, to teenage binge drinking, and performance failures in individual hospitals. All of these provide the meat for the strident headlines which fill the British press – but suggest that the media we have are a symptom of the wider political system, rather than a cause.

## **Conclusion**

The sense from the seminars was of an uneasy stalemate between policy-makers and the media, with the public serving largely as spectators. Some specific ideas were suggested – and errors to be

avoided – which could modestly improve this relationship for the wider public benefit. These included: Ministers resisting the temptation to be swept along by the story of the hour; letting officials and advisors speak more openly to the specialist media, and the greater use of more direct communication such as using government or arm's length body web-sites to rebut misrepresentations of factual material.

The seminars also touched on the more fundamental question of whether it is possible, and desirable, to change the character of this relationship more fundamentally. This was beyond the remit of the seminars, but we did glimpse possibilities for alternative policy-media futures. For example, a refashioning of the way that public service broadcasting is funded in the UK could fundamentally change the character of our media, given the contrasting models seen in other countries, such as sponsorship of specialist knowledge and skills in journalism. Similarly, the rapid growth of new forms of web-based media may transform the character of public debate in ways that we have yet to fully understand. Third, it seems worth investigating whether the current regulatory regimes – for both broadcast and more pressingly print media – have their regulatory focus right and can do the jobs required of them<sup>20</sup>. Other institutes, established to study the media and their role in society are best placed to take forward some of these issues. The Institute for Government will be looking at policy-making in government as part of its 2010 research programme and the outputs of these seminars into that work.

Institute for Government, February 2010

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<sup>20</sup> An Ipsos-Mori poll in January 2010 for the Media Standards Trust suggested that 52% of the public wanted an independent self-regulatory body to regulate the press rather than a newspaper complaints body. Only 17% supported the idea of a government regulator. 48% thought the body should initiate investigations rather than wait for complaints. See <http://www.mediastandardstrust.org/medianews/newsdetails.aspx?sid=49876>