

Does the mass media have a direct effect on British Politics

The argument that the mass media have a direct effect on British politics is certainly a contentious one, for although it would be virtually impossible to support a hypothesis that the media has no effect on British politics, it can be difficult at times to ascertain whether the media plays a direct or an indirect role in affecting British politics. The media will be examined both as a whole and in its separate parts, with its constituent parts being the print media and the electronic media, of which the electronic media can also be further sub-divided into television (and satellite) and radio.

There is much evidence about where the electorate gather their political information from, with surveys showing that television is most peoples' primary source of political information (60% to 70%) with the press coming in at a distant second on 25% to 30% (Jones & Kavanagh, 1991:97). There are many possible reasons for this, with the sheer number of television sets and an almost universal access to them being the most probable. Another reason for the dependence on the television rather than the print media for political information is the perceived bias of newspapers and the perceived neutrality of television news.

It is universally acknowledged that newspapers show a certain amount of political bias, although the bias is more obvious in some newspapers than others, with the obvious example of an openly biased newspaper being the strong pro-Conservative party line of The Sun. It is not just the tabloids who are biased, however, for it would be difficult to argue that The Telegraph is any less pro-Conservative than some of the tabloids, it is just that the bias is not as openly exhibited in the broadsheets than in the tabloids, but it is there nonetheless. The pertinent question when examining the role of newspapers in British politics is whether they influence voters or not, and if so, to what extent.

There are three main theories about the issue of press bias, of which the first one is reinforcement theory, which states that a person is more likely to read a newspaper with a similar political outlook to themselves, so the newspaper re-inforces their political views instead of totally shaping them. This theory "claims that the media do not create or mould public opinion, but merely reflect or reinforce it" (Budge & McKay, 1993:121). Audiences (or readers), according to reinforcement theory, prefer to select the messages that appeal to them, and so market forces ensure that the media barons supply this to them. The logical result of this theory is a fairly toothless media, but not enough evidence exists to either prove or disprove this.

The second major theory about press bias is agenda-setting theory, which states that the media help to set the political agenda, so while the media does not control what people think, it does influence what they think about. This theory agrees with reinforcement theory up to a point, in that it does not subscribe to the view that the media influences what people think, but it does stress the fact that the media have a significant amount of power in being able to set the agenda in politics. It must be remembered, however, that the newspapers still have a responsibility to their readership, so the agenda they set must be what their readership wants to read about, as their power of setting the

agenda will disappear as their readership does. Again, there is not enough evidence to either conclusively prove or disprove this, but the available evidence points to it being more likely than unlikely, with the spate of ministerial and junior ministerial resignations after newspaper revelations about them suggesting the validity of this theory.

The final major theory about press bias is that the press does have an influence on voting behaviour and political attitudes. According to this theory, if someone reads, for example, a newspaper that is biased in favour of the Conservative party, they would be more inclined to vote Conservative than someone who reads a newspaper which supports the Labour party. It is difficult to produce enough evidence to conclusively prove this theory, but "recent research finds that the papers have a significant impact on voting behaviour even after political attitudes and party identification are taken into account...even those who identify with a given party and believe in its policies are more likely to vote for another party if...they regularly read a paper which supports the other party" (Budge & McKay,1993:121). This theory, therefore, seems the most likely of the three theories, as there is more evidence pointing towards its validity than there is for the other two major theories. The one thing that must be born in mind, however, is that there is less evidence concerning reinforcement theory (either for or against) than the other two, and it is possible that all three theories may be accurate to a certain extent, as the current available evidence is inconclusive.

Television and radio, by contrast, are perceived as being neutral, and therefore a much more reliable source of political information than newspapers. They are different from newspapers in two major areas, the first being that, in theory, anyone can publish a newspaper, but due to the scarcity of frequencies available, they are regarded as public property and are regulated by the government. The second point, which stems from the first one, is that because television and radio frequencies are seen as public property, any radio and television stations must serve the public interest. Indeed, television and radio are required by law to maintain a proper balance between the political parties and to be impartial. This approach seems to have succeeded, for the evidence shows that about two-thirds of the electorate believe that television news is unbiased, compared to a third who believe the same about newspapers. A third of the electorate think that the newspapers do show a political bias, compared to only ten per cent who believe the same about television (all statistics from Budge & McKay,1993:118) so the evidence does seem to be clear on this matter.

Although the effect of the media on voting behaviour and political beliefs through newspaper bias is difficult to either conclusively prove or disprove, there has been a great change in party organisation (especially at a local level) since the advent of the mass media. The evidence on this subject is more clear-cut, for there is little doubt that since the advent of the mass media there has been much less reliance on having a strong local membership, local party workers and canvassers whereby formerly they were of paramount importance in winning elections and getting the party's policies across to the voters. In the days of the mass media, however, politicians can "reach more people via two minutes on television than they could meet in a lifetime's door-to-door canvassing" (Jones & Kavanagh,1991:100). The media have not totally

destroyed the importance of the local party organisation in election strategy, but they have severely weakened it.

As the mass media has contributed greatly towards changing the structure of the local party machines, it has also changed the way in which elections are fought, and also the focus of elections. Political hustings have all but died out, with political rallies in today's British politics being little more than carefully organised performances (John Major's performances on his soapbox in the 1992 general election is the exception, rather than the rule). Today's political meetings are one-party rallies, with little chance of there being anyone there brave enough (or loud enough) to heckle, with Labour's Sheffield rally during the 1992 general election campaign being a prime example of this. These rallies are televised, so the politicians' messages get beamed into millions of homes, giving them much more exposure than the old political hustings could ever do.

Elections now are much more Presidential in character than before the advent of the mass media, with the emphasis being on the leaders of the parties rather than on the candidates in each constituency or the party as a whole. The major reason for this is that "because television conveys political news in such an abbreviated form, it is inevitable it should focus upon party leaders who also inevitably have come to represent their party's brand image" (Jones & Kavanagh, 1991:102). The party leaders are now of paramount importance to the parties, with the ability to put a point across clearly on television being one of the main criteria for becoming a party leader. The example of Michael Foot as Labour party leader offers a good illustration of this point, for he was one of the best speakers in the House of Commons, with a keen intellect to match, but his appearance on television made him look frail and elderly, someone who does not particularly inspire confidence in a party. On the other side of the coin is the effect that someone as telegenic as Tony Blair can have on a party's fortunes. He gives the Labour party an advantage, in that he looks good on television and seems to be the master of the 'soundbite' - a concise summarisation of an issue that can be reported on the news to get a message across in the shortest possible time.

Other changes in the conduct of elections that can be traced back to the increased influence of the media are the crucial roles played by campaign and media managers. The Conservative party began this trend with the employing of advertising firms such as Saatchi and Saatchi, and media gurus like Tim Bell. Labour have not totally ignored this area of politics, however, as during Neil Kinnock's tenure as party leader Peter Mandelson, an ex-television producer, was appointed to the post of Communications Director to improve the presentation of the Labour party.

As general elections have come to be fought more and more on television, the newspapers have also changed the way in which they report on politics, especially the tabloids. Newspapers seem to be more interested in the private lives of politicians than in any policies they might have. They dig around in politicians' early lives and current private lives, trying to unearth anything that will help sell more newspapers, with a good

recent example being the Sun's revelations that John Major was the 'toyboy' of an older woman who lived nearby. Stories like this have absolutely no relevance to the politics of today, but the irrefutable fact is that if a newspaper breaks a story such as this, more people will buy that newspaper that day to read about it, therefore a newspaper proprietor could argue that he is only obeying market forces by breaking a story such as this. The fact remains, however, that stories such as this and personal attacks such as Neil Kinnock had to endure during his time as Labour party leader (and especially during the 1992 general election) have been on the rise in recent years, and have undoubtedly helped with the rise of valence politics, where politics is all about presentation, not substance, and being attractive to the media is seen as a prime asset for a politician.

The televising of the House of Commons has also had an effect on British politics for, as mentioned earlier, politicians now need to be more telegenic, especially party leaders who have to endure a televised Prime Minister's questions, where any mistakes are seen by a national audience both live and on the evening news. This also allows the electorate to actually see first hand what their MP is doing on their behalf in Parliament and whether he or she is a good or bad parliamentary performer. The televising of the House of Commons has provoked more interest in politics, as it is now available to a much wider audience. With television programmes such as Question Time and comprehensive coverage of all the major elections also on television, the electorate has no excuse to not be the best informed electorate in history, with such easy access to political information.

The media has also change the forms of political communications, from the open rallies where the Prime Minister of the day would address thousands of people, through "fireside chats" on radio, to the present day system where politicians give us relaxed television performances, while trying to persuade the electorate that they have the right policies for the country and striving "to persuade us of their competence, commitment and sincerity within the time constraints of television schedules and audience attention-spans" (Jones & Kavanagh,1991:101).

There is either scant or inconclusive evidence on many parts of the media's influence on British politics, but there are other areas, such as how the media has revolutionised how elections are fought, where there is much evidence that the media has had a direct and major influence on British politics. Added to this is the fact that the arguments suggesting that this is true do seem to be more reasonable than their opposing arguments. However there is scant evidence to suggest that the media has very little direct effect, so while the overall evidence is not totally conclusive, the evidence does seem to suggest that the media does have a direct effect on British politics, at least in some areas.