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Media Culture Society 2003 25: 669

DOI: 10.1177/01634437030255006

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Whither mass media and power? Evidence for a critical elite theory alternative

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This article argues that critical approaches in media studies must begin looking beyond the mass media paradigm.¹ Findings in several different research areas suggest that the concept of mass influence, enacted through the mass media, is of itself no longer adequate to explain the utility of communications in sustaining unequal power relations in society. Media effects research, while generally supporting a minimal effects model, remains inconclusive and strongly contested. Whether the media are influential or not, news content, according to many accounts, is becoming increasingly 'dumbed down' and apolitical. Media and audiences are becoming more fractured and dispersed with the arrival of new media. At the same time, there has been a decline in support for mass parties and national institutions as individuals look towards alternative forms of political activity. Put together, these trends suggest that traditional critical paradigms in media studies – those based purely on mass communications and influence – are no longer sufficient.

For many, there is nothing new about these developments. Indeed, for some time they have supplied the justification to switch the focus away from issues of inequality or discussions of power in society altogether. However, the intention of this piece is not to provide further evidence for this trend. Rather, it is to present some initial steps towards an alternative critical perspective. As such it argues for a focus on processes of elite policy-making and how media and culture affect elite decisions. From this perspective inter-elite communications and the culture of elites is just as, if not more, significant for sustaining political and economic forms of power in society. In this alternative paradigm most negotiations take place outside the public sphere of the mass media and without reference to the mass of

Media, Culture & Society © 2003 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 25: 669–690
[0163-4437(200309)25:5;669–690;035552]

consumer-citizens. Where the media is involved a significant proportion of the discussion is produced by, and aimed at, decision-making and power-broking elites. All of which suggests that the exploration of some form of elite theory would be a productive way forward for critical research in media studies.

Much of the evidence to support this alternative approach is to be found in studies scattered across media and cultural studies, political communications and political sociology. But the empirical evidence presented here comes from a study of elite news sources and journalists in the UK. Most of what is presented is transcript material generated in the interview of 98 senior organizational representatives, public relations practitioners and news journalists. Interviewees are drawn largely from the corporate sector, political parties, and the financial and political sections of the national press.²

From mass to elite communications

Media studies, when focusing on questions of power and politics, has almost invariably framed its research within a paradigm of elite–mass communication transmitted via the mass media. For both critical work in cultural studies and the political economy tradition in media sociology, thinking was guided by a simple premise – that the ruling classes sustained themselves through the control of ideas. For political economists this has translated into an analysis of the means (ownership, advertising, legal controls, etc.) whereby state and/or corporate classes control the production of media texts. Similarly, those looking at culture have offered a variety of means (‘pseudo individuality’, ‘interpellation’, ‘primary definition’, etc.) to explain the evolution and dissemination of ‘dominant ideologies’ between the capitalist classes and the masses.

Arguably, for those who dismiss neo-Marxist approaches the alternatives retain much of the same elite–mass media paradigm. Liberal pluralists, in both media studies and political communications, hold very securely to an ‘ideal type’ of democracy that links elite decision-making to the mass of consumer citizenry via the mass media. By the same token, researchers in cultural studies frequently challenge radical pessimism by emphasizing bottom-up resistance. Work on active audiences, oppositional subcultures and ‘semiotic guerrillas’ puts the emphasis on individual autonomy but within the same elite–mass framework (postmodern fundamentalists excepted). For all these approaches a sense of mass communication is central to notions of power. Whether the mass media are a means of upholding or undermining the democratic process, a means of maintaining class dominance or ensuring the continued circulation of powerful elites and dominant culture, elite–mass communications is key.

However, there is growing empirical evidence, spread across several disciplines, to suggest that this paradigm was never more than a partial explanation for the maintenance of unequal power relations in society. Recent studies suggest that it will become still less significant in the future. Perhaps the strongest refutation of the mass communications paradigm is to be found in work on effects and audiences. The vast majority of studies, be they in political communications (e.g. Curtice and Semetko, 1994; Kavanagh and Gosschalk, 1995; King, 1998; Norris et al., 1999), sociology and social psychology (e.g. Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Abercrombie et al., 1980, 1990; Barker and Petley, 1997; Livingstone 1998) or media and cultural studies (Morley, 1980; Ang, 1986; Liebes and Katz, 1990), conclude that the evidence suggests no more than the occurrence of minimal effects. Effects are difficult to isolate and establish, media texts are complex and contradictory, and audiences are active and influenced by other social and cultural factors.³

Whether mass media influence exists or not may no longer be a particularly relevant question. There are several reasons for this. To start with, a series of studies of news production argue that, in one way or another, news content is becoming less informed and less 'political'. News organizations, operating in an increasingly competitive market, have fought to raise productivity and maintain audience share by cutting editorial budgets and popularizing news content. Investigative, contextualized journalism and coverage of complex debates and policy-making have thus made way for scandal, 'infotainment', personality-led news and public relations material (see Kimball, 1994; Franklin, 1994, 1997; Ewen, 1996; Tiffen, 1999; Curran, 2000; Davis, 2000a, 2002; Hess, 2000; Hallin, 2000). In effect, news values, that once drew journalists to cover those social and political processes that increased inequality, are being adapted to encourage alternative, more profitable forms of news reporting.

Whatever the change in news content or quality, evidence suggests that a growing proportion of the public is less inclined to consume 'political news'. Both national newspapers and national broadcasting networks have seen a steady decline in their audience figures over recent decades (Gitlin, 1994; Tunstall, 1996; Seymour-Ure, 1996; Davis, 2000a; Hallin, 2000). Part of the decline is due to the fragmentation of audiences as media producers and advertisers use new media to focus on multiple niche markets. Even so, the overall percentage of people viewing/reading news products at all has steadily declined, and those news customers retained are more likely to be interested in information, sport and entertainment (see surveys in, for example, Morrison, 1991; Negrine, 1996; Seymour-Ure, 1996; Tunstall, 1996).

The fragmentation of mass media has been joined by the fragmentation of mass politics. In all post-industrial countries there has been quite a strong decline in support for mainstream political parties and national

legislative bodies. Party membership, electoral support, and faith in politicians and the electoral system has gone down as support for protest movements and single-issue pressure groups has gone up (Castells, 1997; Norris et al., 1999; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000; Heath et al., 2001; Norris, 2002). Similarly, the control of economic resources has seeped away from central government, to be picked up by quangos, corporations, pressure groups and international bodies (Held, 1995; Negrine, 1996; Castells, 1997; Grant, 2000).

Taken together, these studies suggest that the elite–mass paradigm that has dominated media and cultural studies and political communications is rather less important than it was. Clear inequalities may have increased in recent decades (see, for example, Commission on Social Justice, 1994; Hills, 1996; Hutton, 1996; Castells, 1998; Monbiot, 2000), the mass media may have been unduly influenced by the state and corporate sectors, and the mass of consumer-citizens may have been strongly influenced by mass media and culture – but how linked were these phenomena?

The starting point for an alternative theory of politics and communications needs to begin, not with the mass media and its influence of a large, general audience, but with the communications surrounding specific political actors. In other words, research needs to begin by observing those who make or influence significant policy decisions, and looking at how media, culture and communications influences regular processes of decision-making. Following this line of research, at least with reference to the news media, a very different critical paradigm becomes apparent – one that suggests that some form of critical elite theory should be further investigated in media studies.

The first step in this alternative paradigm, to be found in the study of media–source relations, is that elite sources dominate news production. In studies of the reporting of politics (Gans, 1979; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Tiffen, 1989; Bennett, 1990; Hess, 2000), crime (Hall et al., 1978; Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994), environmental issues (Anderson, 1997; Allan et al., 2000), tax, welfare and financial matters (Deacon and Golding, 1994; Davis, 2002), and war (Glasgow University Media Group, 1985, 1993; Hallin, 1994; Bennett and Paletz, 1994) institutional and, to a lesser extent, corporate elite sources are the most cited and the greatest suppliers of news ‘information subsidies’. Second, many of these same studies (see in particular, Bennett, 1990; Miller, 1994; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Deacon and Golding, 1994; Hallin, 1994) emphasize the fact that elites are repeatedly in public negotiation and conflict with each other. Governments, political parties, business associations and individual corporations, often attempt to use the media to promote their conflicting political and economic goals.

Third, there is a significant amount of research which indicates that elites are themselves very susceptible to media influence and ‘dominant ideolo-

gies' (Abercrombie et al., 1980, 1990; Zaller, 1997; Lance-Bennett, 1997; Miller and Krosnick, 1997). Certainly there are several documented cases of elites being influenced in their decision-making by media campaigns (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Nelson, 1989; Manheim, 1994; Davis, 2000a, 2000b). This leads naturally on to the fourth point, one that is documented by the following study of elite news sources: that is that much elite promotional activity is aimed, not at the mass of consumer-citizens but, rather, at other rival elites. Corporate and political elites, while needing to communicate with larger publics, also spend a significant amount of time targeting rival elites at all levels: within their own organizations, in rival organizations and in organizations in related influential sectors.

Together these points suggest a scenario in which elites are simultaneously the main sources, main targets and some of the most influenced recipients of news. If this is so, it could be concluded that a major function of the news media is to act as a communications channel for the regular negotiations and decision-making that take place between different elite groups – to the exclusion of the mass of consumer-citizens. Decisions which involve such things as the development of institutional policies, legislation, budgets, regulatory regimes and power structures, take place in communication networks in which the mass of consumer-citizens can be no more than ill-informed spectators.

The following research findings come out of a series of 98 semi-structured interviews with elite news sources and journalists. These interviews, in addition to revealing the regular targeting of other elites, also indicate a number of other trends which offer further evidence of this alternative paradigm. These are: (a) the blocking of larger audiences and media coverage, (b) the development of small elite communication networks which include top journalists, and (c) the 'capture' of reporters by the 'policy communities' they report on.

Evidence from research on public relations and media campaigning

The corporate sector

Starting with the corporate sector, the recent rapid expansion of business public relations and corporate news source activity has been well documented (Cutlip et al., 2000; Davis, 2000b; Miller and Dinan, 2000). A phenomenon often recorded in these studies is that a significant proportion of communications resources are spent in avoiding mainstream coverage (see also Dreier, 1988; Berkman and Kitch, 1986; Ericson et al., 1989; Tumber, 1993). This is because most mainstream news about corporations is likely to involve scandal, environmental problems, financial losses, fraud

and other negative stories. Certainly there are frequent objections from business leaders about the tone of coverage they do receive (CBI and Abbey Life, 1981; Hoge, 1988; Smith, 1988; Rees-Mogg, 1992).

During the interview period of my research it became apparent that a substantial proportion of corporate communications time is indeed taken up with blocking journalists and stifling negative coverage. Nick Chaloner of Abbey National typically explained (interview, 16.9.98):

There are negative stories that we try to keep out of the press on a daily basis. People turn to the media first rather than come to the lender. In some cases, stories appear without our ever being asked for comment. . . . There are so many rumors and so much bar room talk and, at the same time, there are thousands of journalists trying to write a story about something.

Richard Oldworth, of the financial public relations consultancy Buchanan, similarly stated that a lot of client work involves attempts to 'kill' stories (interview, 26.8.98):

In terms of the media, a lot of our job is to minimize bad news coverage. We get quite a lot of that. We often get calls on a Friday night from a Sunday journalist asking about a negative report and we try and get the article scrapped. But that depends on your relationship with the press.

In effect, for virtually all the corporate news sources interviewed, evading wider public scrutiny was an established part of the job.

At the same time, it was also apparent that, in the financial sector, more communications resources were targeted at elite decision-makers than the public. In fact, a breakdown of the major occupations of public relations practitioners working for PRCA (Public Relations Consultants Association) consultancies (see Davis, 2000b), in rank order, during the period 1989–96 are: Financial, Consumer, Corporate, Trade and Industry, Government Relations, Employee Relations, High Tech and Other. Financial, Corporate, and Trade and Industry, three of the four major categories listed are in fact aimed at the corporate sector itself. Other surveys (see, for example, Newman, 1984; White and Mazur, 1995) have also suggested that corporate sources consider shareholders, analysts and government officials to be rather more important audiences than the mainstream media and general public.

All interviewees concurred with this. While they were all concerned with the company's 'brand image', as relayed to mass public audiences (employee and consumer), they also tended to be strongly concerned with private elite targets. This form of elite communications was in fact regarded as a priority for senior communications staff and corporate sources. As Jan Shawe of the Prudential (interview, 7.10.98) explained:

The two key functions are the government affairs/policy development section and the investor relations/press office section. These two sections are made up

of parts working closely together. Community affairs spend is higher and there are more people on it but, in terms of importance, it comes behind the other two.

These private decision-makers were targeted directly, through lobbying and by way of media-oriented public relations. Starting with government and institutions, PR practitioners focused on ministers, government civil servants and industry regulators. For example, Chris Hopson of the Granada Media Group, described his role as follows (interview, 13.10.98):

The primary focus of the job for me is identifying how the company works, how the profitability of the company can be improved and how PR may be used to gain that profitability. That is my principal task. For example, if the regulations were being renegotiated, how best would that renegotiation work for us? A while ago we wanted to change the ownership rules to enable us to takeover LWT and Yorkshire Tyne Tees. Were it not for our and other PR departments' activities, changes would not have happened and we would not have been able to take those companies over. Those changes and takeovers have helped to increase our profits ten times since 1991. . . . We have saved the company around £40 million in recent regulatory questions and probably saved the ITV companies £100 million in total.

For publicly quoted companies, resources were periodically devoted to government policy-making and institutional regulation. However, their most consistent concerns were with institutional shareholders and the business community. It was deemed vital for publicly quoted companies to keep communicating with and influencing their main shareholders. A strong share price raised the company's value, kept major shareholders supportive, encouraged investment and diminished the chances of the company suffering a hostile takeover. As Nick Miles of Financial Dynamics professed (interview, 17.8.98):

The market isn't all that efficient. If it were then there would be no reason for us to exist. It doesn't make sense . . . the primary target is the fund manager. He or she might have to look at 300 companies in the sector and unless he is truly remarkable he won't remember everything. So a lot of what we do is try and hit a button with those people, conform to their view of the world so that they buy the shares.

An integral part of the persuasion of shareholders involved attempts to influence specific key opinion formers and the financial community more generally. This translated into communications with business journalists, investment analysts and business leaders. According to Jonny Elwes of Infopress (interview, 31.7.98):

Where PR influences opinions, financial PR influences decisions. It's also the place where third party counts more than ever. In financial services there is so much room for analyses and so many factors. Therefore one needs to influence people who analyse and make decisions.

Every corporate communicator and financial consultant interviewed was aware of who were the top analysts and journalists in their field, how to target them and who might be influenced by them. Within the City, the message repeated by all interviewees was that the potential audience was an extremely small one – usually numbering no more than 100 people. As Bob Gregory, in reference to John Menzies, stated (interview, 21.8.98): ‘In John Menzies, for example, there are a dozen big shareholders, the business press with maybe 20 key editors and journalists, and 10 analysts (50 maximum).’ Or, as Angus Maitland of the Maitland Consultancy (interview, 17.9.98) explained:

You have three significant audiences – the press, the sell-side brokers and the buy-side institutions. Any company has three sets of groups interested. . . . Out of these there are roughly two dozen journalists who are really influential. On the relevant sell-side you have the top-rated analysts and the most-mentioned analysts – out of which about 20 are really key. On top of that you have about 20 top fund managers with about 20 to 50 people. So you could say that the perceptions of a company are dependent on 50–100 individuals.

What ultimately has evolved in the corporate sector generally, and the City more specifically, is the development of closed elite communications networks. These involve heads of industry, their communications staff, large institutional shareholders, analysts and financial journalists. Consequently, business and financial journalists, those who are admitted into these networks, are overly focused on the interests and concerns of those they report on. Indeed, six out of the eight business editors interviewed, in one way or another, tended to confirm this picture. On the one hand, many seemed far more aware of their City audience than the wider shareholding public. On the other, their sources were almost exclusively analysts, financial PRs and corporate heads – all operating within the City. As one financial news editor commented (interview, 1999):

‘We have the highest percentage of businessmen and managers – the highest proportion after the *FT*. So it’s businessmen, managers of big and small businesses and professional investors [we write for] . . . you still have lunches. My diary is still full of lunches with chairmen and chief executives – that hasn’t changed. . . . But in the end it’s a village. They need you as much as you need them. Usually they need you more, so there’s always a negotiation to be done.

And for Alex Brummer of *The Guardian* (interview, 16.6.99):

Traditionally we wrote for *Guardian* readers rather than City ones. Now the view is that we are a much more mainstream paper, which means we spend more time on traditional City and business coverage . . . we are working all the time with chief executives and chairmen. I see CEOs four times a week. I also see Treasury officials, Bank of England officials and others on a regular basis. . . . I talk to one or two PR men each day.

What has thus developed in this area of reporting is a situation in which the principle significance of business news coverage lies in its utility as a

means of communications and influence for a small select elite. As one director of a financial PR consultancy (anonymous, 1998), confidently asserted:

The national financial press are written for the City by the City. So we know that when we are getting coverage we are getting through. What you use the press for is to provoke a thought or confirm a thought. So if an investor is interested and if it's in the press then it gets discussed.

From the other side, journalists were similarly aware of the tight restrictions on their job. As Michael Walters of the *Daily Mail* explained (interview, 19.10.98):

In a way the vacuum is filled much more easily by PR. They offer you an interview or some other source – and you have to be very stubborn-minded to pursue an investigative story on your own. The companies don't like it, the PRs don't like it, the brokers are against it, and the City doesn't want a knocking story. There's a million and one reasons why you can't do it. But if you want to do a positive investigative piece then everyone will help you.

Political parties and government

All these same trends are also in evidence when one looks at the communications practices and media relations of politicians and government officials at Westminster. A significant increase in PR personnel and communications expenditure in recent decades has also been well documented (e.g. Scammell, 1995; Jones, 1995, 1999; Franklin, 1999; Norris et al., 1999; Davis, 2002). Table 1, showing changes in the number of

TABLE 1
Changes in numbers of information officers employed in government departments 1979–2001

| | <i>MoD</i> | <i>FCO</i> | <i>Home Office</i> | <i>DTI</i> | <i>Cabinet Office</i> | <i>PM's Office</i> | <i>Treasury</i> |
|-----------------|------------|------------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1979 | 58 | 19 | 27 | 38 | – | 6 | 12 |
| 1983 | 34 | 17 | 25 | 77 | – | 6 | 12 |
| 1987 | 34 | 13 | 33 | 67 | 11 | 6 | 13 |
| 1991 | 36 | 20 | 37 | 62 | 10 | 6 | 9 |
| 1995 | 36 | 22 | 43 | 69 | 13 | 10 | 13 |
| 1997 | 47 | 30 | 50 | 67 | 14 | 12 | 16 |
| 1999 | 56 | 46 | 54 | 74 | 23 | 14 | 20 |
| 2001 | 87 | 51 | 80 | 77 | 28 | 17 | 30 |
| 1979–2001 % +/- | +50 | +168 | +196 | +103 | +155* | +183 | +150 |

Source: Figures compiled from COI directories 1979–2001⁴

* Increase from 1985 to 2001

information officers employed in government departments, illustrates this rise.

Changes in communications, begun and developed in the Thatcher years (Jones, 1995; Scammell, 1995; Kavanagh, 1995), have proceeded apace during the rise of New Labour (Gould, 1998; Franklin, 1999; Jones, 1999; Rawnsley, 2001). Two trends observed in these and other accounts are: the growing centralization of party/government communications and the increasing restrictions put on information released to journalists and the public. In the attempt to centralize government communications and demonstrate a united front, public debate has been stifled. Certainly, in the view of all lobby journalists interviewed, processes and personalities have taken over from public policy debates. As Andy McSmith of the *Daily Telegraph* typically explained (interview, 14.11.01):

If presentation becomes more important than formation of policy there is an obvious argument not to have rows in public. If appearance rather than outcome becomes key then one either has to repress dissent or get it away from public view. The way Labour policy is developed has completely changed. It's now all behind closed doors. At present the party and the cabinet must appear united at all times. In Britain it is now seen as a big problem if two cabinet ministers disagree – so centralization is the result.

This view was mirrored by those working on the communications side in government and the main political parties. All those involved in political communications stated that they spent the majority of their time blocking and reacting to negative coverage, rather than promoting policy and debate. As Tim Blythe said (interview, 15.9.98): 'I had ten years in Whitehall, and 70 percent of press relations there was keeping stuff out of the papers.' For John Underwood, former Director of Campaigns and Communications at the Labour Party (interview, 6.11.01):

Political party communications is generally more concerned with blocking hostile media coverage and crisis management than it is with proactive campaigning. The proportions are roughly 60:40. Although, when I was with Neil Kinnock, the Labour Party was in a state of near crisis. At times it felt like the balance was more 90 percent defence and 10 percent attack.

For Tim Collins MP, former Director of Communications for the Conservative Party (interview, 7.11.01):

We spend two-thirds to three-quarters of the time reacting to events unfortunately. . . . Now we are in a cleft stick as regards the question of public debate. Those of the public who are interested in politics hold two incompatible views. One, they want independent, objective, unconstrained politicians who can debate freely. Two, they want non-divided, non-split, smoothly functioning parties. Parties look at this second perspective and therefore work hard to cut down on divisions and conflicts. . . . So all parties say they value debate but they are also desperate to stop too much public debate.

While large efforts are made to block public debate and public/reporter access, there also appears to be ample evidence to suggest that the media and journalists are used by politicians to influence political decision-making. Several examples in the UK are to be found within studies of government reporting (Cockerell et al., 1984; Negrine, 1996; Tunstall, 1996), political (auto) biographies (e.g. Ingham, 1991; Routledge, 1997; Gould, 1998; Lamont, 1999; Major, 1999), and in a recent spate of journalists' accounts of New Labour (McSmith, 1996; Jones, 1999; Rawnsley, 2001).

All the interviewees supported this picture, in some shape or form, and were all able to offer various examples. Gaining positive media coverage was considered an essential part of any party leadership campaign and frequently played a part in the competition for cabinet appointments. It was also apparent that major cabinet disputes were commonly fought out via the media as ministers tried to force through their policies. The aim of this PR work was not public promotion but the influence of decisions made by MPs, cabinet ministers and the Prime Minister. As Paul Routledge of the *Mirror* described (interview, 19.9.1):

It [kite-flying] is also used to dominate one's enemies. Ministers get briefed against by other ministers all the time. . . . It's part of the Mandelsonization of the party. He brought the techniques, the focus groups, the leaking. Leaks only used to come from members of the NEC. What Mandelson brought was spinning ahead of the meeting in an effort to bounce people into decisions in advance.

For one senior Conservative (interview, 2001):

. . . there has been a change in the politics of the Conservative Party in which loyalty and leadership have become less powerful since 1990 – with the decline of Mrs Thatcher. So it has become clear to people that if an incumbent PM can be toppled it is therefore much more possible for other leaders to topple. Therefore . . . a number of people are pursuing their agendas and certainly within the parliamentary party they will use the media to influence that.

Clearly, use of the media to influence leadership battles and ministerial appointments is an intermittent occurrence. However, it appears to have become a fundamental part of day-to-day policy-making and decision-taking within governments and parties. The studies of government reporting and the political biographies all offer extensive descriptions of briefing, leaking and kite-flying as it is used through the media to affect policy decisions. This description of events was given wide-ranging support by interviewees. As Charles Lewington, another former Director of Communications at the Conservative Party, stated (interview, 18.9.01):

In my case we spent huge amounts of time trying to influence colleagues through the media. They were exceptional circumstances. We had a Prime

Minister with a majority of 21 in 1992 and that shrank to zero by 1996. The party was split down the middle. Persuading senior figures on the left and right to temper their words was a very big part of my job.

David Hill, former Head of Communications for Labour, similarly stated (interview, 31.8.01): 'The party since 1994 used the media to float ideas, get discussions going, prepare the ground, and so on. And that has happened more as the party has consolidated its position in government.'

All these trends are perhaps best illustrated in Labour's shift in economic policy and their transformation into a party that is seen as a 'competent manager of the economy'. According to accounts of New Labour (e.g. McSmith, 1996; Routledge, 1997; Gould, 1998; Rawnsley, 2001) and several interviewees, the arrival of the new Blair-Brown axis in 1994 was accompanied by immediate attempts to 'rebrand' Labour as a business-friendly party. Part of that was building up the image of Gordon Brown as the 'Iron Chancellor' and Labour as 'City-friendly'. More important for the party was the very public shift of two particular policies. These were the abandonment of Clause 4, in 1994, and the pledge not to raise income tax levels, a few months before the 1997 election. According to all interviewees both changes were symbolic and designed to separate 'old' from 'new' Labour.

But of great interest to the discussion here was the fact that a large part of the communications campaigns, and the 'spinning' that surrounded them, was aimed at Labour Party members themselves. As interviewees explained, and several accounts of the 1994 conference (McSmith, 1996; Routledge, 1997; Gould, 1998; Rawnsley, 2001) document, the delivery of Blair's speech on Clause 4 was a carefully managed affair – the full implications of which only became clear to delegates when they read journalists' reports of the speech days later. As Hill explained, the removal of Clause 4 was largely about being seen to gain control of 'New Labour' (interview, 31.8.01):

It was necessary for Tony Blair to be seen to be in control of the party and to develop initiatives which showed that he was in control. Bringing the party on board was essential to the project. We said that we were New Labour and therefore needed to show clearly that this was true. This required confronting the party with a major change. Reforming Clause 4 was that change. Once this was achieved it was a matter of building on this strong foundation.

The use of strategic public relations to push new economic policy through, regardless of the views of the NEC (National Executive Committee) or membership, has since become commonplace. As Joy Johnson, ex-Labour Director of Campaigns, explained (interview, 23.1.97):

Certain people with press relations skills have used the press to change the party. . . . The Labour Party has made that into a fine art. . . . Take the tax and

spend announcement on Monday [20.1.97] . . . no change in direct taxation and the public spending freeze. Obviously a complete reversal of what the old Labour Party used to believe in . . . and then to tie it to the public sector pay freeze for two years. And all those stories came out of the media. The announcement on taxation was delivered on the *Today* programme. It was a deliberate policy strategy that hadn't been agreed beyond Blair and Brown. And now there's nothing to be done about it this side of the General Election. And certainly this is what happened repeatedly over the last two years in Labour.

As in the corporate sector, the persuasion of political decision-makers involved the targeting of third parties, including top political journalists, media owners and captains of industry. For David Hill (interview, 31.08.01), one of the main achievements of New Labour in opposition was the persuasion of the tabloid and right-wing press to take them seriously:

What Alastair Campbell did brilliantly was, for the first time in modern politics, to oblige conservative papers to report what Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were saying. Getting all the key Labour politicians into these papers was an essential element in getting the New Labour message across – whether discussing policies or generally commenting on the nature of New Labour. One important element in achieving this was that Tony Blair had assiduously got to know most of the key political journalists during the years before he became leader because he recognized the benefits of this personal contact.

Charles Lewington's account also included the necessity of targeting key editors in both the press and broadcasting (interview, 18.9.01):

There's an expression in America called the 'Big Feet'. It was used in the early Clinton years to describe the key network political commentators, the main political correspondents – the White House correspondents in American terms. These are the people that, once they have decided what way to spin a story, most others will follow. . . . In Bernard Ingham's day there was a group of newspaper political editors from *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph* and *Times* who were the 'Big Feet' of their day. He referred to them as the 'White Commonwealth' and he would make sure that they were always kept in the loop. In the 1990s power switched to the television political editors. These are now undoubtedly the most important opinion formers . . .

As with financial reporting, there is also the strong impression of journalists being drawn into closed networks of communications that develop around Westminster and Whitehall. These networks are made up of politicians, civil servants, prominent members of think tanks and powerful pressure groups, and lobby journalists. According to Lord Tim Bell (interview, 20.11.01):

Politics is a very tiny place . . . if you know 100 people in the right places you can talk to the whole country. Bits of gossip get everywhere, rumours spread around, even if they never appear in the newspapers. . . . Nowadays that grapevine is almost entirely the lobby. Political journalists, lobby journalists,

sketch writers, op ed writers, academics. There's a clear network. . . . The vast majority of policy decisions are taken by vested interests. The public are only consulted when policies have been decided and decision-makers want to be seen to have consulted.

Kevin Maguire's description offers further insight (interview, 6.11.01):

The great danger is that it becomes a small world of 2000 people. I was aware of it when I first came into Parliament. . . . It [that world] also includes think tanks. Bentley at Demos is a Blunkett man. Matthew Taylor at the IPPR is a Blair man. Both slag off Brown. Brown did a lot – although less so now Charlie Wheelan is gone. Jo Moore had a small coterie of trustees around her. . . . I was always marked out as a Brown man because of my previous work with Charlie Wheelan when he was with the AEEU. I know other journalists who are seen as linked with others – Andrew Grice is seen as a Mandelson man. Others talk to Byers, some to Milburn, some to Prescott. Colin Brown, Prescott's biographer, spoke to him every weekend. . . . Those relationships become part of the institution – a member of the club, which is what the House of Commons is.

As a result of these small networks, it seemed clear that many lobby journalists had become strongly sucked into a process whereby both their principal sources and principal audiences were drawn from these same small networks. The most senior journalists (normally columnists and sketch writers) believed they could write with some immunity from possible source reprisals. But the majority admitted that, when writing, they had ongoing concerns about how their sources and peers would respond to their work. As Andrew Grice of *The Independent* relayed (interview, 5.9.01):

I try and think of a typical *Independent* reader – but I constantly have to remind myself of that because it's easy to slip into a position where you are thinking more about the people you are mixing with; thinking about those in the Westminster village. You are always aware of how articles might be perceived by your sources, be they backbenchers, ministers or spin doctors. . . . So, if I'm being honest – we are all human and we are not just writing for the target audience, but for the politicians and spin doctors also.

Or as George Jones of the *Daily Telegraph* explained (interview, 7.8.01):

Politics is a very complex thing. You get feedback from particular sources in the political class. You get feedback from other journalists and politicians. If you get a scoop, it's followed up by other political journalists and the *Today* programme. So this is the sort of political cycle zone . . . really you want to be in the position of setting the political agenda – there is an important element of setting the agenda – and, in order to do that, you want to appeal to your fellow journalists and the political classes.

Within these closed networks it was also evident that political correspondents had to 'remain in the loop'. Those who strayed risked exclusion

from briefings and other sources of information. At the height of the Thatcher era potentially hostile journalists were kept out. With the return of the Blair government, with its large majority, the same pattern has emerged. As Trevor Kavanagh of *The Sun* typically explained (interview, 28.8.01):

This government is different. They are the most tight-fisted group when it comes to the dissemination of any information and they use all sorts of rules to control journalists' access to ministers and relations with journalists. They will feed out story lines regularly – but only to those considered important at the time, the *Mail* one day, *Guardian* the next, *The Sun* the next. . . . One used to be able to go free range fossicking, to go digging around, chatting to anyone and everyone in the lobby. You could investigate stories. But the Labour government are very much more tight and buttoned up. . . . Now they feed you a story and you have to be grateful that you have got your scoop from a press release – but that's not journalism. Journalism is about us getting stories that they don't want to see in the public arena. Otherwise we become no more than another branch of government.

In a sense, journalists operating in political elite circles, have, to a degree, become 'captured' by those they report on. It is not a matter of conspiracy or journalists writing under direct pressure from their sources. Instead, journalists are highly reliant on regular source contacts within Westminster, get most of their feedback on what they write from such sources, and are regularly subject to source threats (loss of access) and rewards (generous information/interview supply). Consequently, they become a fundamental part of the closed communications networks in which elite decision-makers attempt to influence each other (see also Protess et al., 1991; Hallin, 1994; Hess, 2000, for similar accounts of the White House press corps in the USA).

Conclusion – steps towards a critical elite theory alternative

What is clear in these examples is that elite groups in the UK are as concerned to use the news media to communicate with other rival elites as they are with much larger non-elite groups. On the one hand, corporate and political party/government elites need to maintain their communications with large groups of consumer-citizens. They need to develop and promote a long-term 'brand' image of the company or party to ensure continuing sales and electoral support. On the other hand, they also have a daily need to make use of communications to influence complex and less visible elite decision-making processes. Both types of communication are deemed vital for sustaining the power of a company or party. But while elite–mass

communication continues to be explored in media and communication studies, elite–elite communication and its socio-political consequences has been largely ignored.

What has been suggested here, through looking at a range of disciplinary research and at the presentation of interview material, is that public mediated debate on significant issues and decisions is declining. Conversely, private debate between powerful elites about public issues has become all the more important. In which case, critical work in media and communications needs to begin looking at power relations from an alternative starting point. This starting point begins with the communications processes that affect decision-making about power relations and the distribution of resources in society. The emphasis here being, not on mass media and control of wider social thinking, but on those political actors who make such decisions and those with whom they are in communication (consciously or otherwise). Unequal power relations are thus generated less by mediated elite persuasion of the masses and more by numerous micro-level decision-making processes within elite networks. The communication which takes place between powerful elites – either through the mass media or in more private communication spheres – in fact excludes the mass of consumer-citizens.

All of which leads one to the conclusion that critical approaches in media studies should begin to explore some form of elite-centred theory. Some tentative thoughts suggest that a synthesis of three different research traditions might bear intellectual fruit. The first of these is classic elite theory (Mosca, Pareto and Michels) and its later critical adaptations by Mills (1956), Domhoff (1967) and Scott (1991). This body of work offers some potentially useful insights in its focus on elites as an alternative driving force of inequality in society. However, it could not be adopted uncritically. Classic elite theory has never been particularly palatable to the critical tradition on account of the normative approach of its advocates. Both these elite traditions have been criticized for their lack of theoretical sophistication and functionalist tendencies. Certainly, attempts to mark out clearly identifiable, self-perpetuating groups of elites should not be the main goal.

The research emphasis is perhaps better directed by a second body of work, developed in politics and sociology, which focuses on systems of government and decision-making. Critical work here, for example, looks at the way in which decision-making regularly excludes the concerns of certain groups in society (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962) and the need for political actors to yield to the demands of business and established groups in order to sustain economic prosperity and therefore their own long-term survival (Lindblom, 1977; Offe, 1984). A body of such work on political decision-making is currently accumulating in research on policy commun-

ities and issue networks (see Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Smith, 1993; Marsh, 1998). In this research it is not a matter of identifying a rigid, homogeneous elite that holds power. Instead research begins with the identification of policy-making networks or wider issue communities, and then looks at those involved and their influence over policy development.

The third area involves the insights provided by work in media and cultural studies. None of the work mentioned hitherto has specifically looked at the role of media and culture in the development of elite networks and in policy-making itself. Such things as the use of the media by elite decision-makers, the form and content of their communications, media effects as they apply to elites, and the culture in which elites communicate, have not been key research goals (not, at least, in relation to the political and economic spheres).⁵ Thus, whether one wants to look at the role of the news media and journalists, or at more private forms of elite communication, or at the culture (or fields or discourse) within which decision-makers operate, there is clearly ample scope for research.

Arguably, this merging of theoretical insights and empirical foci from across media, sociology and politics, might present the foundations for a new critical body of research in media studies. Critical concerns and questions combined with an elite focus, a policy networks empirical approach, and communications theory, may possibly provide a framework for new critical work.

Notes

1. The research for this article was carried out with the financial support of the ESRC – award number R00429824372. Thanks also to James Curran for his very helpful comments.

2. The interview breakdown is as follows: 41 CEOs/directors of communication in the corporate sector (either at FTSE top 150 companies or corporate/financial PR consultancies), 11 with (ex) political party communications directors, 28 with editors and correspondents of national newspapers and broadcasting companies, and 18 with other individuals with a professional interest in public relations (e.g. professional associations and NUJ representatives, civil servants, etc.).

3. In the last decade, several challenges (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Miller and Philo, 1996; Iyengar and Reeves, 1997) have made an impact on the 'conventional wisdom' without dramatically altering the consensus.

4. All figures accumulated from *The IPO Directory – Information and Press Officers in Government Departments and Public Corporations* (formerly called *Chief Public Relations, Information and Press Officers in Government Departments, Public Corporations, etc.*).

5. Some related work has been done in sociology, anthropology and cultural studies (e.g. Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992; Miller, 1997; Du Gay, 1997).

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- Nick Chaloner, Director of Corporate Affairs at Abbey National – 16.9.98.
- Tim Collins MP (former Director of Communications and Senior Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Party) – 7.11.01.
- Jonny Elwes, Account Manager at Infopress – 31.7.98.
- Bob Gregory, Director at Bell Pottinger – 21.8.98.
- Andrew Grice, Political Editor of *The Independent*, 5.9.01.

- David Hill, Director of Good Relations Group (former Head of Communications for the Labour Party, 1993–8) – 31.08.01.
- Chris Hopson, Director of Corporate Affairs at Granada Media Group – 13.10.98.
- Joy Johnson, freelance journalist (former Labour Director of Campaigns, Elections and Media) – 23.1.97.
- George Jones, Political Correspondent at the *Daily Telegraph* – 7.8.01.
- Trevor Kavanagh, Political Editor at *The Sun* – 28.08.01.
- Charles Lewington, Managing Director of Media Strategy (former Director of Communications for the Conservative Party 1995–7) – 18.09.01.
- Andy McSmith, Chief Political Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* – 14.11.01.
- Kevin Maguire, Chief Reporter of *The Guardian* – 6.11.01.
- Angus Maitland, Chairman of the Maitland Consultancy – 17.9.98.
- Nick Miles, Chief Executive Officer of Financial Dynamics – 17.8.98.
- Richard Oldworth, Chief Executive Officer of Buchanan – 26.8.98.
- Paul Routledge, Chief Political Commentator of the *Daily Mirror* – 19.9.01.
- Jan Shawe, Director of Corporate Affairs at the Prudential – 7.10.98.
- John Underwood, Director of Clear (former Director of Campaigns and Communications at the Labour Party) – 6.11.01.
- Michael Walters, Deputy City Editor of the *Daily Mail* – 19.10.98.

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