

15

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE MASS MEDIA

circuits of communication
and structures of power

GREG PHILO, DAVID MILLER AND
CATHERINE HAPPER

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INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE FIRST places that people go to find out what is happening in the world is the media. Yet most people do not devote all that much time to thinking about the way in which that content is shaped and the mechanics which lie behind it. In fact, the communications process is complex, with a diverse range of elements and agencies facilitating the flow of information. These include the interest groups that input to the production of media, the content of media products such as television news and social media, and the way in which audiences respond to media messages and any consequent outcomes. The advent of digital media complicates the situation in that it constructs audiences simultaneously as media consumers *and* content producers, allowing for a more interactive level of response while also supporting a parallel flow of information that interacts with mainstream media. A further dimension is the actions of policy-makers, who can both feed information into the range of media and, at the same time, respond to what they assume are the beliefs and attitudes of audiences. The key point is that all of these elements interact and are dynamic. While in past research each element (e.g., content or effects of media) has often been examined separately, we will explain here why it is important to analyse the interrelations of each of these different elements of the communications process simultaneously. To illustrate this we will focus on the relationship between media content and what audiences actually believe and understand. We will then go on to show the results of recent research in this area and discuss how our work relates to other approaches in mass communications studies, such as the theory of the 'active' audience. Finally we will look at the social consequences of audience beliefs and understandings and how these relate to decision-making in society.

CIRCUITS OF COMMUNICATION

Let's outline the four key elements of the communication process.

- 1 *Social and political institutions and their influence on the supply of information* These institutions include a vast range of organizations – government, business, interest or pressure groups, trade unions, universities and research institutes, scientists, think-tanks, lobbyists and PR consultancies. In this, 'lobbying' can mean the supply of information by interest groups and their attempts to influence state policy. It can also refer to the 'lobby system' by which the UK government supplies information to journalists in parliamentary groups who meet regularly to receive briefings on policy.
- 2 *The media and their content* The press, radio and television and online news, blogs and social networks, current affairs and documentary programmes, science programming, talk shows, popular and professional scientific magazines and journals, popular books on science, and women's and men's magazines; fictional forms include novels, feature films, television and radio plays, drama serials and soap operas.
- 3 *The public* Stratified in terms of class, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexual identity and age as well as by professional and political commitments and social experience.
- 4 *Decision-makers* In local, national and supranational government as well as in business organizations, interest groups, universities, think-tanks and lobbyists and PR consultancies. In UK terms, government is at the local council level, the national level (the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly), the state level (the UK Parliament), and the supranational and global levels (the European Parliament and European Commission, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank or the UN).

These different elements constitute a circuit and lead in some senses into one another, so 'decision-makers' (number 4) are also key figures in social and political institutions which supply information to the media (as in number 1). In formulating policy statements for public consumption, politicians and other decision-makers will consider in advance how what they release will be received and interpreted by the media and the likely public response. As we have suggested, these elements must be analysed simultaneously to show the interactions between them.

It is also important to note that the elements can interact independently and that circuits of communication are not simply linear. Many models or theories of mass media assume a linear model in which social institutions supply information, which is published in the mass media, and to which audiences respond in particular ways. Public responses then feed through to decision-making in society. Arguably this kind of linear model is embedded in both liberal and neo-Marxian accounts. For liberal or pluralist accounts, the competition of interests in society is reflected in a relatively heterogeneous media landscape from which citizens decide on their political preferences, leading to democratic decision-making. Some neo-Marxian approaches see ruling-class ideas as dominating mass media, with the result that these 'dominant' ideas are reproduced among the public. This is assumed to lead directly or indirectly to the reproduction of capitalism. Both models find it difficult to conceive that public opinion may not be a critical element in decision-making in society. Yet the interactive model we advocate hypothesizes that any element in the circuit can interact with any other directly.

For example, the model suggests that the media may have direct effects on decision-making in society and that social interests may be able to influence decision-making directly via their communicative activities. In both cases this is a kind of 'short-circuit' which leaves out the public. The research priority for us is to examine the linkages between differing nodes of the circuit empirically. In practice the relationship between elements of the circuit varies with the subject, the relative balance of forces and specific historical contexts. To illustrate this we will consider some recent developments in our society.

The neoliberal era and the structural transformation of the circuit of communication

The relationship between the elements of the circuit of communication has changed structurally in the last three decades. To understand this we need to examine changes in all elements of the circuit. The most significant changes over the last three decades in the West, and indeed most of the rest of the world, have been connected with the phenomenon known as neoliberalism. In the period before the Second World War, the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s had led many to oppose the development of an unfettered capitalism. The Depression had followed the stock market crash of 1929, and free market capitalism was seen as inherently unstable and corrupt. After the war, new 'social democratic' societies were planned, especially in Europe, in which the state would be responsible for planning employment and welfare systems. In the UK, the NHS was established and large sections of industry were taken into public ownership. These policies required progressive taxation and were seen as moving society towards a greater equality. In the 1970s a strong reaction to these policies developed, initially in the USA and the UK, especially to the taxation of the rich and to controls on the 'free market'. This was the rise of the New Right or the neoliberals.

The neoliberal project was to roll back the priorities of the social democratic state, with its commitments to welfare and full employment and 'high' taxation to fund these. The state would shrink and its role would instead be to remove the 'restrictions' on the free market, to deregulate (as with the banks) and to produce a 'flexible' labour market (which involved removing trade union powers). This would increase the mobility of capital and allow larger units to form, making money wherever possible, which would include speculating on property or food prices or packaging up useless debts and selling them on the world markets as 'financial instruments'. The whole process would of course 'reward the wealth-makers', which in practice meant that those who owned and controlled capital could use their position in the market to multiply their wealth. This last priority was certainly achieved. A recent report from Oxfam notes that: 'Over the last thirty years inequality has grown dramatically in many countries. In the US the share of national income going to the top 1% has doubled since 1980 from 10 to 20% . . . In the UK inequality is rapidly returning to levels not seen since the time of Charles Dickens' (Oxfam Media Briefing, 18 January 2013). The neoliberal revolution over the last thirty years has transformed social institutions and their relationships both to one another and to the media of mass communication. We will now look in turn at corporations, the state, civil society and the quality of democracy.

An increase in corporate power is a widely recognized feature of the current period. One obvious way in which corporations came to have more power was the transfer of key sections of the economy from the public to the private sector via privatization. Following this there were many further waves of neoliberal reform, including the introduction of market or market-like

mechanisms into what remained of the public sector – the health service, education, social services and central government. These were compounded by the rise of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Public–Private Partnership (PPP) schemes: all of these gave corporations more direct control over investment decisions, as well as more involvement in what had been democratically controlled institutions and directly in the provision of government services – meaning not simply in delivery but in policy and decision-making. In other words, during the period from 1979 to 2012, the space for direct exercise of corporate power and the space for the direct influence of corporations over government policy increased very markedly.

Although neoliberal ideology suggests that the state should be reduced to a simple ‘night-watchman’ role, in practice under neoliberalism the state is strengthened in a number of ways, as is captured very well in the title of Andrew Gamble’s (1983) early book on Thatcherism: *The Free Economy and the Strong State*. It is also true that many neoliberals recognized that the free market has all sorts of consequences which are not conducive to social order and which can, if left unchecked, develop into threats to corporate power. One response is neoconservatism – an attempt to bring moral order back in at both the international and the interpersonal level. As a result we see the undermining of civil liberties, increases in state surveillance of the poor and of dissent, and a remoralizing of politics (Miller 2006).

Neoliberalism has also meant attacks on the organized working class (Philo and Miller 2001). In the UK, which pioneered neoliberal reforms, the attack on the trade unions occurred very early in the process, most notably in relation to the defeat of the miners’ strike of 1984–5 and in the breaking of the print unions by Rupert Murdoch (Miller and Dinan 2008).

While state power increased in a number of respects in the UK, there was also a hollowing out of the state in terms of its representative functions. Power was concentrated increasingly in central government, and in particular with the prime minister, while Parliament was sidelined, thus diluting the democratic potential of the political system. There were some countervailing tendencies, particularly under New Labour, which introduced devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and a watered-down Freedom of Information Act (Schlesinger, Miller and Dinan 2001). None of these measures significantly reversed the general decline of democratic accountability, at least in the central government at Westminster.

The diminution of democratic controls on capital and on unaccountable state power led to corruption in the political system and throughout the private and public sectors. It was certainly the case that market reforms of the mass media undermined its ability to perform the watchdog function and, as the Leveson inquiry showed, corrupt practices also flourished in sections of the media. However, it is plain that many other institutions were vulnerable to corruption, including the police, the criminal justice system, the City of London, banks, large corporations, the House of Lords and the Commons, and government itself. These had not enjoyed great public trust before the recent neoliberalism, but our own research shows that the elements of the political and economic system have increasingly fallen into disrepute (Miller 2004a). Much of this was traceable to or involved in the liberalization of markets or the expanded role of the private-interest or private-sector actors in public governance, this being a signature element of neoliberalism, or ‘market-driven politics’, as Colin Leys put it (Leys 2003).

The trend towards global ‘governance’ has been boosted by the progressive dilution of democratic controls on capital as corporations have increasingly sought to buy their way into the political process. There has been a torrent of books with very similar titles on this ‘corporate takeover’ and on the ‘sleaze’ and ‘scandals’ which go with it, at the national level in the USA,

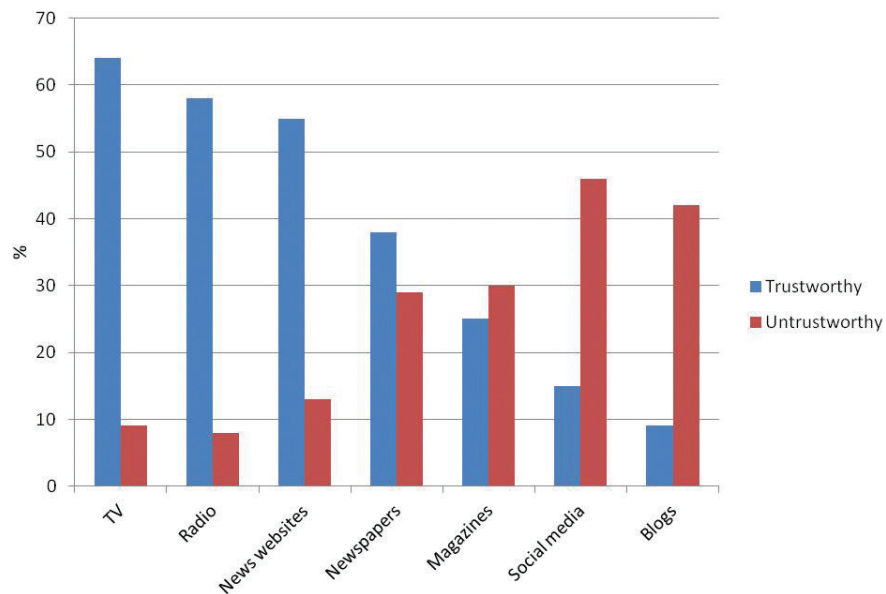


Figure 15.1 Public (dis)trust of various media forms

Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because of other answers ('Neither trustworthy or untrustworthy' and 'Don't know')

Source: Compiled with data from the *PBS UK Trust Report* (2011).

Canada and the UK, as well as at the EU and global levels (Balanya et al. 2000; Beder 2006a, 2006b; Carroll 2010; Derber 1998; Monbiot 2000; Sklair 2000). The increasing blurring of previously separate roles and the decreasing clarity on accountability have been described by the anthropologist Janine Wedel (2011) as presaging the emergence of a 'shadow elite' whose activities are 'beyond the traditional mechanisms of accountability' because they have multiple, overlapping and not fully disclosed roles. They work as government advisers, thin-tankers and consultants to businesses. They appear in the media. As Wedel notes, 'it's very difficult for the public to know who exactly they represent' (cited in Schwartz 2010). These developments suggest a weakening of democratic controls.

We can now turn to how these transformations relate to varying elements of the circuit of communication.

Short circuits: private communication channels

The circuit of communication suggests that social institutions can communicate directly with decision-makers in pursuit of their interests. In terms of the model of the circuit of communication, lobbying is about the direct relations between social interests and decision-makers in local, national and supranational governmental agencies. This direct relationship means that, in general, lobbying bypasses media and public debate. Under neoliberalism the scope for direct attempts at influencing policy has greatly expanded, developing most significantly in the USA and the UK (Miller 2008). The British lobbying industry itself is estimated to have doubled in size since the early 1990s (Dinan and Miller 2012).

Table 15.1: Public attitudes to news media in the UK (%)

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
I believe that UK news and media organizations always report stories accurately	2	22	28	31	11	5
I believe that UK news and media organizations are fully independent from the influence of powerful people and organizations	2	13	19	38	21	7

Source: Compiled with data from the *PBS UK Trust Report* (2011).

BOX 15.1 LOBBYING IN THE UK AND THE USA

In the USA the role of lobbyists in the political system has been a recurrent political issue. So much so that, on his inauguration as president, Barack Obama enacted in January 2009 a sweeping executive order on ethics and the so-called revolving door for members of his administration (Blumenthal 2011). The 'revolving door' analogy is used to describe the situation where personnel in various industries move between roles in private corporations and decisive roles in legislative or regulatory bodies which are meant independently to regulate the very same industries and corporations from which they have come (and often return back to). The issue of the revolving door has also been seen as a contributory factor in the financial crisis, as financial regulators often either came from or entered the industry punctuated by their spell as supposed watchdogs. In some instances members of financial regulatory bodies even remained as directors of banks or other financial corporations while they worked with the regulator (Miller and Dinan 2009).

Since 'cash for questions' in the 1980s and 'cash for access' in the 1990s, there has been a recurrent drip-drip of lobbying scandals in the UK (Dinan and Miller 2012; Leigh and Vulliamy 1997; Miller 2008) and, indeed, at the EU level (Dinan and Miller 2006; Miller and Harkins 2010). Lobbying itself is an almost completely covert business (Silverstein 1998). It trades influence for cash and generally does not attempt to influence public opinion. In its day-to-day activities it is beyond the reach of public debate. It runs the risk of undermining democracy in the sense that private interests try to influence legislation and decision-making directly, rather than democratically or by means of media or public debate.

The role of the media here is negligible, with one exception. That is when lobbying misdeeds are exposed in the media. The audience of the mass media is interested in the behaviours of the powerful, and sometimes newspapers, TV and, more recently, social media will respond to this. The banking crisis and arguments over tax evasion have focused public attention on corporate and private wealth. This can have the effect of undermining elements of corporate self-interest. However, the bulk of the mainstream media tend to side with or at



Undercover lobbying by corporations with vested interests in pushing forward particular government policies represents a democratic short circuit which needs to be publicized by various media forms in order to be tackled. (© Byzantine_K/Flickr)

least not criticize powerful corporate interests, and, whatever the faults of individuals, free market capitalism is presented as essentially the only game in town. Indeed, much of the media is owned by such interests. In practice, decision-making by corporations and governments in both the USA and the UK may go on in secret, away from the eyes of the media and with little popular involvement. While social media can raise awareness of individual cases of unethical behaviours, as witnessed by the damage done to the Starbucks brand by the recent #boycottstarbucks campaign on Twitter, 'consumers' are almost completely ignorant of all such debates. This does not suggest that they are 'dupes' of the system – it is just that they don't know.

There is also a sense in which much of what appears in even mainstream newspapers is not really for the bulk of the audience who consume the news. Private debates among the powerful can surface in the media as part of a struggle within the state apparatus or corporations, such as when opposing elite factions brief against each other in the media (Miller 1993). Indeed it is plausible to argue that many of the outbreaks of apparent dissent express, at least in part, faction fighting between closely allied fractions of the elite, as in the opposition to the

Iraq war from significant sections of the military and intelligence agencies. Much of the PR workload of large publicly listed corporations is devoted to 'investor relations', a specialism that targets the business pages and communicates directly with fund managers and others in the world of financial capital (Miller and Dinan 2000). Their successes and failures are won and lost quite outside the headline news agenda of TV news (Davis 2000). In spite of the changes digital media have made to public participation in the flow of information, there are still few ways in which we can be part of the conversation (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012).

SEMINAR QUESTIONS

- 1 How does a circuit of communications approach to the media differ from other sociological approaches?
- 2 What might the advantages of this approach be?
- 3 How does the example of lobbying demonstrate that we need to be aware of historical changes in the circuit of communications?

INFORMATION SUPPLY INSTITUTIONS AND THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

The public relations industry

Without sources of information, there would be no news. Social institutions of all types increasingly understand the value of planning media strategies to manage their image in the media and with key publics (Miller 1998). Equally, the value of keeping an organization out of the news is recognized, particularly where there is significant political controversy.

Many different organizations now have press offices and engage in public relations activities. Government departments have large information divisions responsible for protecting their image and publishing large amounts of information every day. In the last twenty years the PR industry has become more and more significant in attempting to shape the news, and a host of books have chronicled the rise of the dishonesty and deception that goes with it (e.g., Beder, 1997; Hager and Burton 1999; Nelson 1989; Rowell 1996; Stauber and Rampton 1995, 2001). The growth of the public relations industry is closely linked to corporate globalization (Miller and Dinan 2003) and to forms of neoliberal governance, including deregulation and privatization (Miller and Dinan 2000). As a result public relations has itself become big business, with the emergence of a number of mega-corporations such as Omnicom, Interpublic and WPP, each owning many global public relations consultancies and networks (Miller and Dinan 2003). There has been very strong growth in professional PR (consultancy and in-house) in the past couple of decades. For instance, in 1963 there were 'perhaps' 3,000 PR people in Britain (Tunstall 1964). In 2005 a 'conservative estimate' suggested some 47,800 were employed in public relations in the UK (Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2005: 6). A US study has estimated that in 1980 there were 1.2 PR workers for every journalist. By 2010 the ratio was four to one (Hazlehurst 2013).

Recently, the focus of much lobbying and public relations activity has shifted from the centres of power in the nation-state to international bodies as corporations increasingly move capital globally to seek higher and quicker profits. But in the wake of the globalization of capital

has come the globalization of protest. The protests in Seattle in 1999 against the WTO and in Prague in 2000 against the IMF signalled the public emergence in the West of a heterogeneous assemblage of different global interests united by their opposition to the free market and the dominance of predominantly US multinationals. Anti-capitalist protests have occurred across the world as the global reach of corporations has made clear the interconnectedness of local protests and then as this was reinforced by the global financial crisis. While digital media has aided public relations in some ways – speeding up the process by which damage control can be implemented – it also allows for the public, operating en masse, to build influential global campaigns such as the Occupy movement. One key aspect of the protests is an opposition to the marketing, PR and advertising strategies of multinationals. There has also been extensive criticism of government PR activities. The propaganda campaign to sell the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, including the false claims about the existence of stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, are now well known to have involved significant misinformation and have convinced many that government communications were less than accurate (Miller 2004b).

The speed with which the propaganda on Iraq was discredited in 2002–3 showed an intensified new level of resistance to the misinformation and distortion that are central to the PR

BOX 15.2 WIKILEAKS

Perhaps the greatest potential challenge to the PR industry in the twenty-first century came in the form of WikiLeaks, the global online organization which has ‘leaked’ classified documents, from the Afghan warfront among others, that governments sought to keep confidential. The aim of the ‘leaks’ was to provide the public with not only secret information but information without spin. WikiLeaks disclosures of 2010 showed real potential for the breakdown of the governmental mechanisms of controlling the release and shape of information; however, it also exposed that transparency is far from achievable, even in the digital age. For example, when it released US State Department cables in November 2010, several companies that WikiLeaks used, including Amazon and PayPal, bowed to government pressure and blocked them, which made it much more difficult for the organization to sustain its online operations. Further, as the information to be released was so dense and complex, WikiLeaks was forced to turn to major media outlets to assist in the delivery of the information – with this move it handed the information over to traditional gatekeepers to shape and sell as was deemed ‘newsworthy’.

and propaganda business. Key elements of the propaganda were debunked by the use of the internet by activists rather than mainstream journalists, an illustration of the potential for the internet to be used for countervailing power.

There are increasingly possibilities for pressure groups and the powerless to intervene in the process of PR. It is also possible to plan and execute promotional strategies on behalf of the powerless which don’t compromise either radical politics or a respect for truth. The key question for the future is whether the systematic distortions of promotional culture can be curbed in the interests of democratic deliberation and decision-making.

The media industry

The media operate within a complex set of pressures of ownership, editorial control and economic interest. Journalists do have some measure of autonomy in their daily work routines,

but this varies across media. These variations are in part a result of variations in news values, but they also reflect the promotional networks that form around varying journalistic beats. At the pinnacle of the news values of broadcasting, of the broadsheet press and of some elements of the tabloid press is hard news. This typically revolves around the news beats of central government, which are covered by political correspondents or lobby journalists. Down a notch in terms of news value are more peripheral government departments, such as defence, education, agriculture or health, which typically have their own corps of specialist journalists.

As a result of this form of organization, the bulk of political news originates with the central bureaucracies of Whitehall and the political party's news management apparatus, although specialist correspondents have more freedom to devote their output to the intricacies of policy debates or in the activities of 'resource poor' groups (e.g., charities or activist groups) than their non-specialist colleagues on the news desk. The backdrop to all of this, however, is a media industry which is increasingly accountable to commercial imperatives. In the press, investigative journalism has declined, to be replaced by lifestyle and consumer writing. In what is now a 24-hour TV news environment, the obsession with 'liveness' and what looks like



A recent trend in media reporting is towards 'liveness' and immediate on-the-spot reporting of everything from natural disasters and terrorist attacks to public scandals and celebrity gossip. How might this affect the quality of journalism, and ultimately its purposes in society? (© U.S. Department of Agriculture/Flickr)

immediate on-the-spot reporting has taken precedence over clear accounts of what is happening and why (Snow 2000). On social media, where things move even faster, stories come and go in minutes, and sensationalism is paramount.

The media remain central to the exercise of power in society. They not only guide us in what to think, they are very good at telling us what to think *about* – in other words, at setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects (McCoombs 2014). But the media can also severely limit the information with which we understand events in the world. They can remove issues from public discussion. The analysis of media content – of what we are told and not told – remains a prime concern. The method which the Glasgow Media Group (2000) has developed to analyse the content of media texts is called thematic analysis. It is based on the assumption that in any contentious area there will be competing ways of explaining events and their history. Ideas are linked to interests, and these competing interests will seek to explain the world in ways which justify their own position. So ideology (meaning an interest-linked perspective) and the struggle for legitimacy go hand in hand. The media response to the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath illustrates this well, as discussed in box 15.3.

We can see how various constraints affected discussions in the media of how the banking crisis and the problems it generated should be resolved. There are four key factors which structured this coverage, and these also shape media coverage in different areas.

- 1 Privately owned newspapers have their own political and economic preferences.
- 2 This has to be qualified by the fact that these are commercial organizations and have, in some way, to respond to the beliefs and desires of their readers in order to sustain sales.
- 3 Democratic representation in relation to publicly accountable institutions such as the BBC, which has been described above.
- 4 The most powerful unelected groups, such as the bankers themselves and other members of the financial class, are likely to have immediate access to the BBC and other media outlets because they are treated as ‘experts’ and important decision-makers.

All this means that, when the crisis develops, the people who are most likely to be asked about solutions are very likely to be those who are most supportive of the system which created the problems in the first place. These people and other key figures such as senior politicians are often referred to as ‘primary definers’, as they can set agendas for media coverage.

The lack of alternative systems pushed by the media made it possible in practice for the terms of the public debate to be changed. The banking crisis had caused a contraction in the world economy; in the UK, tax receipts fell, while the government continued to spend, in part to subsidize the banks. Since no transformation of the economy or the banking system was deemed possible, the solution was simply to cut spending. This was justified by arguing that welfare spending was too high. A receptive popular media highlighted stories of ‘scroungers’ and ‘shirkers’, though overwhelmingly the bulk of welfare cuts were actually felt by the elderly and those in low-paid work. But, by this sleight of ideological hand, the banking crisis and the intrinsic problems of economic systems disappear from view.

BOX 15.3 THE BANKING CRISIS

The heart of the crisis was that international banks had lent huge sums of money to inflated property markets, mainly in the USA but also in the UK and other parts of Europe. These loans were often to people and institutions that would not be able to repay them. But the risks were ignored, many argue, because the financial sector was interested only in profits and the huge bonuses that were being made from the deals that were being pushed through. As Elliot and Atkinson (2008: 11) put it: 'In January [2008], panellists at the World Economic Forum in Davos were asked how the big banks of North America and Europe had failed to spot the potential losses from sub-prime lending. The one-word answer from a group that included the chairman of Lloyds, London . . . was "greed"'. In the UK, the political group which would historically have been most likely to criticize such behaviour would have been the Labour Party, which for most of the twentieth century was social democratic: it believed that free market profiteering should be curbed, that the people as a whole should own key sectors of industry and commerce, and that the rights of working people should be defended. However, after election defeats in 1983, 1987 and 1992 to the Conservatives – who promoted a free market philosophy – the Labour Party rethought its approach. As a result it abandoned its traditional criticism of the free market and adopted a very supportive policy towards the financial sector (Philo 1995). New Labour was elected to power in 1997 on the slogan 'Things can only get better', which was a reference to the perceived decline in public services and of corruption and sleaze in public life. New Labour would have a bigger safety net for the poor and spend more on health and the public sector. But nonetheless its new leader, Tony Blair, was seen as continuing Thatcher's key economic policies.

The deregulation of the banks continued under Blair and his chancellor (later prime minister), Gordon Brown. The reasons for this sympathetic relation with finance were not simply electoral. This sector of the economy is very powerful and can pressure governments with the argument that it is relatively mobile and can move if the conditions in a particular country are not favourable. The City of London is an extremely powerful institution – a private corporation in its own right and perhaps the most effective lobbyist in history. It's a city government that represents one interest alone, which is the financial interest. The City still acts as a state within a state. The PM has to meet the City if it asks for it in ten days; the queen has to meet within a week if it requests it. So it has this extraordinary power within the UK's institutional framework.

So how did these social, political and commercial relationships affect the media coverage of the banking crisis when it happened? The bulk of the press is privately owned and is traditionally conservative in its support, favouring free markets and deregulation. Put simply, the bankers, private enterprise and high profits were heroes, or at least were accepted as heroes, as long as the economy appeared to be booming, house prices went up, and the New Labour government could spend increased tax revenues on health and education.

The free market approach was championed by the Murdoch press (including *The Sun* and *The Times*) plus the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily Mirror* is traditionally more left wing but tends to follow the policies of the Labour Party. *The Guardian* and *The Independent* are sometimes to the left but have relatively small readerships. However, the key suppliers of public information and news for the bulk of the population are the television services, particularly the BBC. This is important since the BBC limits the range of the political arguments which it features on the basis of its own definition of democracy. This in essence consists of the population voting for elected representatives. The BBC then features these representatives on television and radio, and what they say constitutes very largely the limits of democratic debate. In other words, TV debate is limited mostly to the views of the three main parties. But, since all of these have become wedded to free market philosophy, the discussion of alternatives to this approach is very sparse.

BOX 15.4 RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

When the financial crisis broke in 2008, the British popular press reflected the angry mood of its readers. The *Daily Mail*, with its middle-class readership whose pensions and savings were potentially threatened, thundered from its front page:

GREED THAT FUELLED A CRASH (14 October 2008)

The Sun put it more succinctly:

SCUMBAG MILLIONAIRES

Shamed Banked Bosses 'Sorry' for Crisis (11 February 2009)

But, among the sound and fury, there are no demands here for alternative solutions, such as taking back the bonuses through a wealth tax or transforming the financial sector by taking the bulk of it into public ownership. These are 'outside' acceptable media debate, so we can complain, but in the end the existing system must remain. As *The Sun* explains in an editorial, 'Many will ask if it is right that tax payers are forced to subsidise irresponsible borrowers and greedy banks. But what was the alternative? Neither America nor Britain could stand by and watch their economies disintegrate' (20 September 2008). This thought is then taken further by David Cameron who, as prime minister, argued that we must stop attacking the bankers. In the *Daily Telegraph*, under the headline 'David Cameron: stop seeking vengeance on bankers', he was reported as saying: 'Voters must stop seeking to "take revenge" on banks and accept they are vital to economic recovery' (15 January 2011)

A month later *The Independent* and *The Guardian* (9 February 2011) reported that the Conservative Party had received more than half its income from the City and property developers. In the face of such structures of power, the role of the mainstream media is largely to act as a forum for grumbles and discontent but not to explore serious alternatives.

SEMINAR QUESTIONS

- 1 Discuss the proposition that the PR industry is a neutral tool which can be used by a wide range of interests in society.
- 2 Does the rise of social media make it easier for anti-establishment voices to get a hearing?
- 3 Explain how the circuit of communications operates to limit alternatives and potential solutions to dominant explanations of the economic crisis.
- 4 How can the content of news be affected by powerful social interests?

MEDIA CONTENT AND AUDIENCE BELIEF/ UNDERSTANDING

'Preferred' views and explanations

We can now show in detail how this absence of alternatives, together with the highlighting of 'preferred' views and explanations, can influence public understanding. In our recent research we have illustrated this by analysing the content of television and the press. The

essence of our method here was first to note each of the explanations and ways of understanding which were being put forward and the range of available evidence which could underpin different positions. We identified these from existing public debate, from published materials such as books, and from any other relevant sources. We then analysed the content of TV news programmes and showed how all of these different explanations were featured (or not). In practice we found that some explanations were given prominence in news headlines or interview questions while others were downgraded or excluded. If some explanations were present on the news and others were absent, then it seemed likely to us that this would affect what TV audiences understood and believed. Of course people might have access to other sources of information – for example, if they had direct experience of what was being reported or if they read ‘alternative’ accounts which gave information that was not on the news. These methods form the basis for the substantial series of content studies which the Glasgow Media Group (2000) has undertaken. However, to investigate how the media impacts on what people actually believe and the source of those beliefs, it is necessary to work directly with audiences.

Further, we believe it is important to study media content and processes of audience reception simultaneously. The impact of media on public belief depends in part on the manner in which messages are constructed and also on what audiences ‘bring’ to their understanding of what they are being told. But how well informed they are and what they can bring in terms of prior knowledge of a subject is not the same for everyone in the audience. This means that a media message can be received differently and its potential influence will vary between audience groups. It is not just levels of knowledge that audience members carry with them – they also bring cultural values, preferences and levels of interest. These can all affect how the message is received. So the impact of media is best assessed by looking at content and processes of reception together as parts of the circuit of communication. We can illustrate this with examples from our study of media and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, discussed in box 15.5.

Explaining coverage

So why does the news not give proper explanations of the history and context of events? The crucial reason is that to explain these, or to refer to them as underlying the violence, could be very controversial. Israel is closely allied to the United States, and there are very strong pro-Israel lobbies in the USA and to some extent in Britain. For a journalist to delve too deeply into controversial areas is simply to invite trouble (what Herman and Chomsky (1988) call ‘flak’). It is much safer to stick with ‘action’ footage and simply recount the day’s events. Israel has very powerful voices to speak for it, and it combines this with a well-organized public relations apparatus which supplies ‘favourable’ stories and statements to the media and criticizes those of which it disapproves. *The Independent* newspaper reported in September 2001 that the Israeli embassy ‘has mounted a huge drive to influence the British media’ and that ‘a senior Israeli official [has] publicly boasted that Israel has influenced the editorial policy of the BBC’ (21 September 2001). Israel prefers to stress the attacks and bombings made upon it and the vicious anti-Semitism of some Islamic groups rather than to have the legality of its own actions subject to public debate. The settlement policy is widely regarded as illegal in international law, and this has certainly been the view of the British government. Human rights organizations have also been very critical of the conduct of Israeli forces in the occupied territories. The

BOX 15.5 CASE STUDY: BAD NEWS FROM ISRAEL

In our research we have found that people who were well informed on or who had direct experience of a subject area were more likely to be critical of what they saw on the news than people who knew very little about it. In the area of foreign coverage, for example, where direct experience is comparatively rare, audiences are more likely to rely on TV news as a key source of information. Our research showed that many people had little understanding of the reasons for the Israel–Palestine conflict and its origins. It was apparent that this lack of understanding (and indeed misunderstanding) was compounded by the news reports they had watched. A key reason for this was that explanations were rarely given on the news and, when they were, journalists often spoke obliquely, almost in a form of short-hand. For the audience to understand the significance of what they were saying would require a level of understanding and background knowledge which was simply not present in most people. For example, in a news bulletin which featured the progress of peace talks, a journalist made a series of very brief comments on the issues which underpinned the conflict: ‘The basic raw disagreements remain – *the future, for example, of this city Jerusalem, the future of Jewish settlements and the returning refugees*. For all that, together with the anger and bitterness felt out in the West Bank, then I think it’s clear this crisis is not about to abate’ (ITN, 18.30, 16 October 2001, emphasis added).

There are several elements in this statement that require some background knowledge to be understood. ‘Refugees’, for example, are cited as a key issue. The journalist does not say which refugees, but he means the Palestinians. In our research, we asked an audience sample of 743 young people where the Palestinian refugees had come from and how they had become refugees. The vast majority replied that they did not know. To understand the journalist’s comments, the audience would need to have the information that the refugees were forcibly displaced from their homes and land when Israel was established in 1948 and later subject to military occupation at the hands of Israeli forces – which the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim documents in detail in *The Iron Wall* (2000). In a content study of eighty-nine news bulletins, however, we found that, of 3,536 lines of text in total, only seventeen explained the history of the conflict.

Further, in our audience groups we found that many people did not understand that the Palestinians were subject to a military occupation and did not know who was ‘occupying’ the occupied territories. On TV news, journalists sometimes used the word ‘occupied’ but did not explain that the Israelis were involved in a military occupation. For example, a BBC bulletin referred to ‘the settlers who have made their homes in occupied territory’ (BBC1, 18.00, 9 February 2001). The reference to settlers is interesting because it speaks of ‘occupied territories’ without making it clear that it is the Israelis who are the ‘occupiers’.

There was extensive coverage of the violence, and there was sympathy expressed for those caught up in it, but very little analysis of the nature and causes. Again Palestinian perspectives were not there in any substance, and the practical effect was to remove the rationale for Palestinian action. Much of the news implicitly assumed the status quo – as if trouble and violence ‘started’ with the Palestinians launching an attack to which the Israelis ‘responded’.

In our work with focus groups we found many examples of how much assumptions impacted upon public understanding. As one young woman put it:

Speaker: You always think of the Palestinians as being really aggressive because of the stories you hear on the news. I always put the blame on them in my own head.

Moderator: Is it presented as if the Palestinians somehow start it and then the Israelis follow on?

Speaker: Exactly, I always think the Israelis are fighting back against the bombings that have been done to them. (Quote from 2002 in Philo and Berry 2011: 297–8)

Israeli human rights group B'Tselem wrote in 1998 that 85 percent of Palestinian prisoners interrogated by the security services were tortured (about a thousand people each year, as reported in *The Observer* 13 December 1998). The United Nations human rights commission has also been severely critical, but we hear little of such matters on TV news. Our research showed that the Israeli government is normally able to present a coherent public relations perspective and to dominate news agendas with its own way of seeing the conflict.

In terms of the communications process, this shows the clear links between information supply, production and news content. Speaking with us, one veteran BBC journalist commented on the absence of the Palestinian perspective. What was missing was the view that 'It is a war of national liberation – a periodic guerrilla war, sometimes using violent means, in which a population is trying to throw off an occupying force' (Philo and Berry 2011: 335). The ideological construction of the news has a crucial impact on audience understanding. In a separate study we have shown how the media can construct audience uncertainty, and we will now go on to look at that research in detail.

Audience understanding and new information

Following the election in 2010 when the Conservatives formed the coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, the prime minister pledged to form the 'greenest government ever'. But, by October 2011, on the question of the positioning of tackling climate change in relation to this top priority, the chancellor, George Osborne, in his Conservative Party Conference speech, boldly stated: 'We're not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business'. This political reprioritization mirrors the global and national media coverage, with 2010, according to *Dailyclimate.org* (3 January 2011) the year that 'climate change fell off the map'. The media will not consistently prioritize an issue without the sustained commitment of primary definers, the most powerful of whom are politicians – so, if the politicians are not speaking about it, the media are not reporting it.

But news reporting was problematic before 2010, often criticized for its lack of clarity on the basic scientific arguments. Much has been written about the way in which journalistic norms, primarily the aim of 'balanced' reporting, have shaped climate change as an issue of uncertainty (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, 2007; Boykoff 2011) in that it has allowed a range of powerful lobby groups – often referred to as the climate sceptics – an equal voice to those of the scientists. Organized climate sceptics, such as the Global Warming Policy Foundation in the UK, contribute to a range of media outlets and are instrumental in shaping the agenda on reporting, particularly newspaper reporting. In *Merchants of Doubt* (2010), Oreskes and Conway document the way in which these groups of sceptics, with close connections to key political and industrial figures, have run deliberate and effective strategic campaigns to mislead the public over this issue. In line with this, it was revealed in 2012 that George Osborne had strong personal links with the president of lobbying group British Institute of Energy Economics (BIEE), which is sponsored by Shell and BP (Merrick and Chorley 2012), indicating the closeness of front-line politicians and the sceptical groups.

In 2011 we undertook research to explore the impact of media coverage of climate change on audience understanding and engagement with the issue. This study utilized new methods which involved the creation of an information environment in which audience groups were introduced to a range of possible arguments from different and competing perspectives. We produced television news reports and newspaper articles and online content set in the future,

which showed the predicted consequences of climate change, including a flood in Bangladesh which led to mass global displacement of climate refugees and severe localized flooding, as if they had actually occurred. The aim was to identify the specific triggers which lead people to accept or reject different arguments.

Perhaps not surprisingly, what we found was that the current dip in media attention was having an impact – overwhelmingly, people felt it was a less pressing subject than it had been in the past, with the economic recovery being a greater priority for most. Reflecting the wide range and diversification of voices feeding audiences on this topic, the backdrop to this was a high level of confusion around the scientific arguments concerning climate change and the need for action. While scientists were the most trusted source – ‘information straight from the horse’s mouth’ – the vast majority of participants felt that the science was confused and inconsistent. The belief that the evidence that was available was not solid fuelled the idea that climate change could be (and is) appropriated by different interest groups, such as politicians and business leaders, to their own ends.

This left audiences with no clear idea of who to trust on this subject, a situation exacerbated further by the strongly expressed and widely felt distrust of authority figures, which led to general feelings of powerlessness. The highest number of people named politicians as the source which they trusted least, and discussions revealed that a majority believed they could not be relied upon to act in the best interests of the public in relation to climate change (or indeed on any other issue). The overall picture of current audience reception was therefore one of confusion, cynicism and distrust about public communications, as well as a sense of lessening priority, all of which led to disengagement.

We then introduced the new information in the form of our constructed news reports and newspaper articles. Of the two climate-change-related scenarios, most said that the Bangladesh refugee story affected them most. The main reason for the greater concern and urgency was that the Bangladesh scenario tapped into existing worries about issues such as immigration and the scarcity of resources such as employment and housing. The media accounts alerted participants to the potential personal impact of the causes of climate change and greatly enhanced concern. Most crucially, audience members no longer saw climate change as a vague and theoretical issue but as one that might have real and serious consequences for themselves and their communities. Once they understood that the science is solidly based, and that the potential consequences are real and severe, they saw more clearly that action has to be taken.

When asked at the end of the session about the impact of the scenarios, we found evidence of genuine attitudinal change, most notably an increase in concern in relation to climate change issues (see figure 15.2). However, when we revisited half of our sample six months later, in spite of their immediate responses, the majority claimed that the experience of taking part in the group had not changed their attitudes on climate change in the longer term. This worked both ways. Even among those who had responded during the session with greater concern about the potential effects of climate change there was evidence of original cynical attitudes persisting. Most acknowledged their earlier concern had waned. Evidently the impact of the information and discussions had not always been sustained in the intervening six months. While the new information offered the potential for attitudinal – and behavioural – change, unfortunately the research coincided with a period of low media attention. The attention that was there focused on the political debate over the impact of investment in green energies on the UK economy, widely recognized by our sample as the

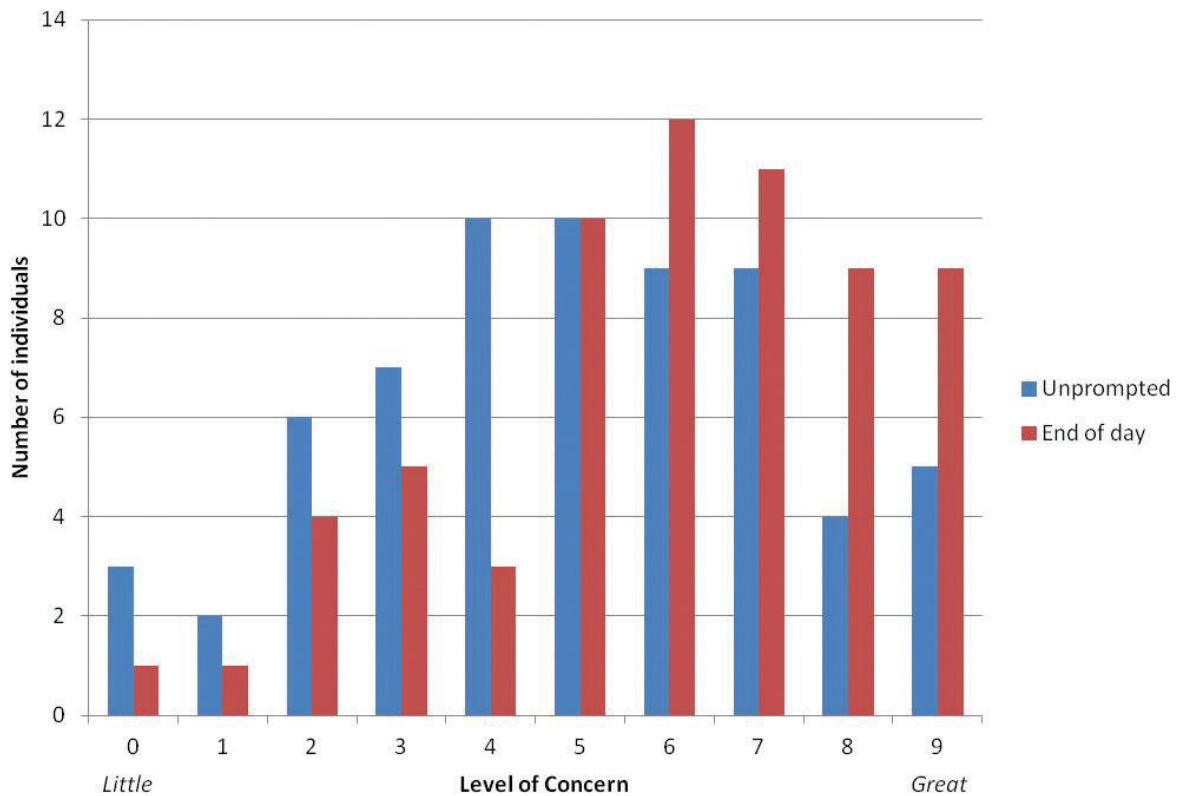


Figure 15.2 Level of individuals' concern on climate issues, before and after watching constructed news reports

Source: Compiled with data from Happer, Philo and Froggatt (2012).

current political priority – in other words, coverage which further highlights uncertainty in relation to taking action. The wider media environment to support such attitudinal change currently does not exist, and the audience engagement and interest we fostered was largely not sustained once people were exposed to the coverage which followed.

The continuing politicization of the subject in the UK media, and the prominent space given to the climate sceptics, has not only led to confusion and distrust but is a strong contributory factor in climate change dropping off the agenda, as the media take their lead from the political sphere. There is strong evidence that the current coverage has inhibited engagement on this issue. Ultimately it lies with the media to redress the balance and properly inform their audiences, but the key to this lies in the redefining of the issue as one of science rather than politics and rebuilding public trust on this basis.

SEMINAR QUESTIONS

- 1 What might be the benefits of studying media content and audience reception simultaneously?
- 2 How far would you agree that the media coverage of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is an ideological construction?

- 3 Read Boykoff and Boykoff's 2004 article 'Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the US Prestige Press'. What are the main reasons for the 'bias' in coverage?
- 4 Discuss the proposition that the coverage of climate change has effectively led to audience disengagement with the issue.

DYNAMIC AUDIENCE MODELS AND DECISION-MAKING OUTCOMES

'Active' audience models

Debates in mass communications theory can be seen to lie on a spectrum in relation to the degree of control that audiences are understood to have. At one end are theories of the 'active' audience. This tradition incorporates a convergence of a number of different schools of thought based on the fundamental premise that small groups or individuals 'actively' construct their own interpretations and the meaning of the world. Media texts are seen to be polysemic – to have many meanings. Media effects are therefore limited, because audiences interpret media messages in different ways reflecting their own background, specific contexts and positionings. This work dominated communications theory for a period, and the focus tended to be on audience pleasure, resistance, identity and fandom. These studies, largely ethnographic in nature, represent a moment in which 'audience activity' lost its grounding in the reality of what audiences actually do with texts. In its most extreme form, the suggestion is that a text will mean completely different things to different audiences. But our own work on responses to media output suggests that varied audience groups do actually have a very clear understanding of the intended message and can reproduce it very accurately. We tested this across a number of different areas of media output and formats – on coverage of Northern Ireland (Miller 1994a, 1994b, 1997), on images of mental illness (Philo 1996) and HIV/AIDS (Kitzinger 1990, 1993; Miller et al. 1998), on the reporting of the 1984–5 miners' strike (Philo 1990), on the Israel–Palestine conflict (Philo and Berry 2006, 2011) and, most recently, on disability (Briant, Philo and Watson 2011). In these studies we asked audience groups to produce their own news accounts from memory, and these consistently reflected the dominant message of typical news content.

Audience experience and the evaluation of media messages

Those who were reliant on information from the media tended to see fraudulent disability claims as a major issue, whereas disabled people themselves expressed significant anger at some of the press reporting and at the accusations linking them with scrounging and fraudulent claims. A key result of our research has been to show how people used their own direct experience or alternative sources of knowledge to evaluate media messages. A corollary of this was that, if there was no direct experience or other knowledge of an issue, then the power of the message would increase. We normally found that if people had direct experience of an issue, and that this conflicted with the media account, then they would reject the media message. However, in the disability study, we found that almost all of those to whom we spoke also had direct experience of disability either through a close family member or close friends, many of whom had tried to get benefits and had failed. One participant, for example, talked about how hard it had been for her mother to get any benefits, and another described the difficulties her partner had faced in trying to get access to the services he required. But this did

BOX 15.6 DISABILITY AND BENEFITS FRAUD

In the study of beliefs about disability and disabled people, we found that audience members' ideas on what constituted a typical newspaper story on disability coincided with the findings of our content analysis (i.e., benefit fraud, equality and services for disabled people). The audience groups were very clear on what the intended message was (i.e., in the first case, that people mainly claim disability benefits fraudulently). They did not interpret the intended meaning of the news differently, although there were differences between the different groups – not over the meaning of the message but over whether they believed it. When we asked the groups to consider what the percentage of people who were fraudulently claiming disability benefits might be, the responses varied from 'about 10 percent' right up to 70 percent. The actual figure is closer to 0.5 percent (Department for Work and Pensions, *Fraud and Error in the Benefit System, 2010/11 Estimates*). When asked to justify where they got their figures from, respondents talked about newspaper articles (for example, the 70 percent figure was said to come from an article in the *Daily Express*) but also referred to their own experiences, with almost all claiming that they knew people who were fraudulently claiming one form of disability benefit or another. Many felt that the system was too easily manipulated: *Speaker 1*: It's really easy to fake symptoms. Or even bad backs.

Speaker 2: That's the biggest one isn't it, bad back.

Speaker 3: . . . people know, don't they, they know what to say and how to get round the system, so there's a big increase in people knowing how to defraud the system.

Further, there was a great deal of resentment directed at what were seen as the large numbers of people fraudulently claiming benefit:

Makes you angry for people who work full time and there are loads of people who are scamming it . . . I mean when you've been scrimping and scrapping and yer man's not too well, you know what I mean?

They get the best of everything . . . Because they're getting their rent paid . . . They've learned the system. You know there are people getting Chinese deliveries every night and you can't afford it.

not lead to a simple rejection of the media message – in fact, we found that individuals often held two potentially competing beliefs in their head simultaneously. Other research shows that direct experience does not necessarily override media coverage where great anger or fear has been generated. Our content analysis on disability showed a significant change in the way it had been reported in British newspapers since 2006, with a reduction in the proportion of articles that described disabled people in sympathetic and deserving terms, an increase in articles which focused on disability benefit and fraud, an increase in the number of articles documenting the claimed 'burden' that disabled people are alleged to place on the economy, and an increase in the use of pejorative language to describe disabled people (Briant, Philo and Watson 2011).

Our research did not show people effortlessly constructing the meaning of texts on the basis of pre-existing systems of thought, as suggested by some active audience theorists. A range of factors, including the level of direct experience, the level of fear generated by media campaigns, and the use of logic and reasoning all influenced how the message was received. We also showed that people from different perspectives concurred as to the meaning of the

message and that its accuracy could be evaluated using agreed evidence. A key finding was that the media message becomes more powerful if there is no direct experience or other knowledge of an issue.

The reception model therefore should be dynamic. Media messages change and so does the flow of experience. The two are crucially related. When political ideologies are developed as political practice, they have consequences in public experience. This means that the systems of ideas which legitimize social and political power must be constantly reworked. For example, in the eighteen years after 1979, the poor really did get poorer and there were increases in interpersonal violence, unemployment and insecurity at work. These changes led in part to the election of Tony Blair and the New Labour government and forced the Conservatives to rethink how they could now justify their own position. The recession of 2008 made way for the newly elected coalition government to bring in a series of extreme and painful cuts to which very little alternative was presented, as discussed above. Each time there is such a radical change, political propaganda must be reformulated to explain, apologize for or legitimize these new relationships and events (Philo 1995). It is exactly because people are not sealed off in conceptual bubbles that there is a need to keep reworking social ideas in relation to the defence of interests. If belief systems were not constantly challenged by new experience and its contradictions, there would be no need for political debate or, indeed, for propaganda and public relations. In real societies, there are parties, class fractions and interest groups who contest how the world is to be explained and what is to be understood as necessary, possible and desirable within it. In our work we have analysed the role of the media in such struggles because of its potential power in reflecting and developing such key elements of public belief.

Digital media and audience 'activity'

By the late 1990s, 'active' audience theories had gone as far as they could go. One reason was the emphasis on ethnographies of different audience segments, which were inexhaustible and increasingly niche. This provided no theoretical grounding for the work. A further reason, however, was the advent of digital media, which allowed for a reframing of the notion of the audience as no longer simply 'active', but 'interactive'. The opportunities offered by digital media allow for a genuine two-way relationship: audiences can be understood simultaneously as media consumers and content producers – or 'producers' (Bruns 2009) – while the text is constructed in the process of engagement. Wikipedia of course is perhaps the greatest example of this process. It is participatory and a source of collective knowledge and expertise, and each unique element is essential. Twitter meanwhile represents the full spectrum of conversations, from mass-personal to micro-personal, the integration of which has created one of the dominant sites of public communication. These and other forms of digital media simply have no equivalents in traditional media. At the same time, traditional media have not been abandoned in favour of new media. Old and new feed off each other in new and different ways in what is sometimes called 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006). In the case of Twitter, it can be said to support a parallel flow of information that interacts with mainstream media, both feeding off it and, in turn, feeding it. But what can be said about the activity of the audience in digital media? And is the role of creative and influential content producer the new norm for media consumption? There are also new issues of power and control that need to be addressed in the digital environment.

Firstly, we'll turn to the patterns of engagement and level of reach and/or influence that

audiences actually have. There is greater potential for audiences to have a public voice in the digital arena and to give the concerns of the public a platform. However, that potential is not always realized. The majority of people are not active producers of digital content. Van Dijck (2009) argues that there are greatly varying levels of participation, from creators to 'lurkers'. Blogs, which really took off after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, have peaked, and statistics show that up to 80 percent are abandoned within one month (Caslon Analytics Blogging) and the others aren't regularly updated – the problem is lack of audience and, as a result, lack of influence. To most people, blogs mean the popular weblogs by high-profile individuals such as Robert Peston of the BBC or Stephen Fry. For the most part blogs operate on a very traditional media model of the few speaking to the many, and largely via their public personae, albeit in their own names. Social networking, the form of online activity that is currently most mainstream, engages audiences at a higher level. Twitter offers its millions of users the opportunity to take part in the public flow of communication but suffers from the same elitism as blog-posting – studies have shown that those with higher levels of education and income are more likely to be engaged (Kagan 2011). Similarly, studies have shown that Twitter is closely aligned with the mainstream media, with the latter shaping the agenda – and its roots in the political process – rather than the other way around.

The other major player, of course, is Facebook, which in less than ten years has become one of the most visited sites in the world. However, early techno-optimists such as Sherry Turkle (2011) have denounced the site as shallow and addictive, fostering a culture of meaningless identity play. For some it is seen simply as social life amplified online and made all the more stressful for keeping permanent records of essentially transient experiences and conversations. In terms of audience engagement, it represents the more mundane, even passive form of consumption. Its individualized stream of 'me' personalizes and depoliticizes public issues and is more likely to promote conservative ideology than to challenge it. While we should not eliminate the possibility of social media as a potential route to the mobilization of resistance in authoritarian regimes, as was arguably the case in the Arab Spring, the key offering of increased public influence offered by digital media is largely mythical thus far (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012).

Finally, there are some important points to be made about ownership and control of digital media. Media industries offer this potential for control within a very specific and very effective economic and business model (Bruns 2009). They not only actively encourage user-generated content but are very efficient at co-opting audience activities either for their own expansion or to feed content – or 'data' – to corporations to target consumers. Increasingly we are also seeing the promotion of 'audience as pusher', as Facebook focuses more on the connection with products such as Coca-Cola than on other potential 'friends'. In this case the audience does the advertisers' jobs for them, and such audience 'activity' is commercially rewarding, as Facebook demonstrated when it floated on the stock market in early 2012. Further media industries are increasingly effective at disciplining and shaping audience engagement. For example, Google search's reliance on algorithms reflects a move away from human beings choosing where they want to go to a computer deciding for them based on (albeit personalized) numbers (Rogers 2010). While studies correlating production, content and reception have not yet developed in relation to digital media, it is not yet looking like an arena that will necessarily encourage plurality of viewpoints or open up opportunities for anonymous members of the public as opposed to elite groups.



Much attention has been paid to the role that social media played in organizing and connecting the various protest movements that constituted the Arab Spring, the first of its kind in the twenty-first century. (© Rowan El Shimi/Flickr)

Decision-making and outcomes

The information that people are given and the judgements that they form are important in how society operates and can both limit and legitimize the actions of the powerful. However, our society is not perfectly responsive to the democratic will of the people. In fact, change comes about not simply as a reflexive response to changes in public belief but because of a further series of processes that are partially dependent on public belief, but not guaranteed by it. Outcomes in society depend on action (or inaction) by people or groups. There is a need to examine the relationship between beliefs about the world and the political conclusions drawn by the public, the relationship between political conclusions and taking political action, and that between public action or protest and political change or continuity.

There is a range of research on how public opinion is constructed, how people evaluate political debates, and how they become involved in activism or political struggles (Gamson 1992; Herbst 1998; Lewis 2001; Lichterman 1996). For us it is important that such questions are asked in relation to other elements of the circuit of communication and power. The agenda of media and communication studies is typically focused on the public and mainstream media elements of communication circuits, such as media production, content and audience reception. But it is also clear that there are potential aspects of circuits of communication that may involve private or only partly public communication. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, it is quite possible for social institutions such as corporations or governments to pursue their interests in private communications and decision-making processes, entirely bypassing the public. In societies such as the UK, much decision-making takes place in virtual isolation from open public debate, both online and offline. So public interpretations of media messages,

public belief and opinion and even political campaigning may be entirely irrelevant to the exercise of communicative power.

SEMINAR QUESTIONS

- 1 Can you think of a current example in which the media have successfully promoted a previously unpopular political decision?
- 2 How much of a platform do digital media offer the general public?
- 3 Can you think of an example in which social media was used effectively to curtail the activities of the powerful classes or one in which it failed to do so?
- 4 Discuss the view that private communications may be even more important in exercising power than public communications.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that it is important to conceive of communication as an integral part of the constitution and operation of modern societies and that we need to examine all aspects of the circuits of communication if we are properly to understand the role of the media and other private and semi-private networks of communication and power. It is not adequate either theoretically or methodologically to examine only part of the circuit. A research agenda based on the circuit of communication is more complex than that arising out of studies of production, content or audience by themselves. The added dimension of digital media, which open up opportunities for the public to take part in the process, further supports this approach. It also makes it harder to trace the connections between differing elements of communicative circuits. Nevertheless, such connections between the interests of powerful institutions, their communicative strategies, media coverage, public opinion, decision-making and outcomes do exist and can be demonstrated by an empirical approach to circuits of communication and power. We have shown in this chapter some of the connections between dominant interests, news coverage and public knowledge (or lack of it) as well as pointing to some of the ways in which decisions in society may be the outcome of undemocratic processes of private communication.

In essence we have described a class society in which the 'free market' operates to concentrate wealth while both excluding the bulk of the world's population and focusing the power to make decisions in increasingly unrepresentative elites. Such processes are not typically discussed in our media and, to the extent that the relationships that structure our world feature at all, are presented as necessary, unavoidable or even beneficial. So the manner in which media accounts function to justify and legitimize while excluding possible alternatives is crucial, and in our work we have sought to explain both class power and how ideology actually works as it is developed and reproduced.

Other theorists have also looked at how the media endorse and legitimize the values of neoliberalism. Curran, for example, argues that media endorse individualism – the 'values' of neoliberalism against collectivism (2011: 64). In some areas this is clearly true; Curran's example is the promotion of notions of self-help in reality TV rather than the analysis of the structures that limit individual development. But in practice very few media outlets or the politicians who supply them with quotes actually endorse outright individualism in the

sense of the destruction of others for selfish interest. So there is a difference between the publicly expressed values of neoliberalism, which embody its legitimations, and its actual consequences in political and economic practice. No serious politician actually advocates Social Darwinism – that social groups should be left to compete with the ‘survival of the fittest’ – even if in practice their policies on climate change, for example, are moving the world in this direction. Arguments in the public sphere and the ideology of the right are most usually conducted in terms of the public good – thus the genesis of phrases such as ‘We are all in this together’. In the USA, the anti-welfare debate is focused in part on how ‘welfarism’ and ‘socialism’ would sap the morale of the nation and damage the possibility of the individual living the American Dream. The accumulation of wealth by a few is justified as the mechanism of economic growth, and ‘trickle-down economics’ is the legitimization by which private accumulation is linked to public good. Much debate in the media is conducted within such a rationality, and the success or failure of policy is judged by notions of the overall good. Thus the pros and cons of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are discussed in the terms of the cost in human lives and money and whether they have met objectives such as improving human rights. The right-wing press will even feature criticism on these terms. Is the Afghan war a ‘blood-soaked mess’ and has the war actually spread the influence of al-Qaeda? (‘Decade of Delusion’, *Daily Mail*, 8 October 2011). But there are other rationalities which remain almost completely outside media discussion and have little to do with ‘we’, ‘our’ and the public good. Corporate and elite interests which harvest the trillions spent on war do not measure success and failure in these terms. For them the conflict has only to take place – though in the case of the Cold War the endless preparation for conflict was sufficient. From such a perspective, how would the spread of al-Qaeda be a problem, since it is now a key legitimizing component in a massive wealth-creation project which produces security and surveillance systems spread through the world and new military technology to drones and beyond. In public media debate, the left and many scientists puzzle over climate change and how the people of the world could possibly ignore such a threat. But the key decisions are not made by ‘the people’. Power and wealth in the world are intensely concentrated, and international elites will extend the principle of the gated communities in which they already live to gated parts of the planet. A key area of media studies should be to analyse such absences in media debate and to develop more detailed accounts of what is present in the media, how this is ideologically shaped and in whose interests. It must then also go beyond what is visible to ask how elites ensure that issues are decided without recourse to public debate, and how such decisions can be brought into the public sphere and subjected to forms of democratic decision-making.

SEMINAR QUESTIONS

- 1 Suggest some examples of significant ‘absences’ in media debate.
- 2 Suggest examples where some of these ‘absences’ have been successfully highlighted and brought into the public sphere.
- 3 Discuss the extent to which ‘new media’ might have changed the circuit of communications.

FURTHER READING

- For a classic discussion of how the media control what is discussed in the public sphere by the process of agenda-setting, see Maxwell McCoombs (2014) *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion* (2nd edn, Polity).

- ▶ For the conflation of media consumption and media production, see Axel Bruns (2009) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (Peter Lang).
- ▶ For a clear introduction to the connections between media, politics and democracy, see James Curran (2011) *Media and Democracy* (Routledge).
- ▶ For an in-depth case analysis of media reporting, see Maxwell Boykoff (2011) *Who Speaks for the Climate? Making Sense of Media Reporting on Climate Change* (Cambridge University Press).
- ▶ *Acknowledgements*: Thanks to Alison and Maureen Gilmour for research on the coverage of Israel/Palestine, Antony Froggatt for his work on climate change and energy security and Will Dinan for his work on PR and lobbying.