



Public relations, politics and the media

Somerville, I. (2004). Public relations, politics and the media. In *The Public Relations Handbook: Second Edition* (pp. 32-47). Routledge.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
The Public Relations Handbook: Second Edition

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2004

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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CHAPTER 3: PUBLIC RELATIONS, POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

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Chapter Aims

This chapter focuses on an increasingly important phenomenon in contemporary democratic societies, namely, the intersection of politics, public relations and the media. The growth of the use of specialist media managers by politicians, and in particular by governments, is a feature of most Western democratic societies where the presentation of policies and personalities in a media saturated age is viewed as a key way to attain and maintain political power. The importance of good presentation is hardly a radical new idea in politics but the increasing reliance on 'buying in' expertise in this vital area has been controversial, to say the least.

Introduction

'The end of Labour's spin cycle?' (*The Times*, 30th August 2003)

'Exit the spinmeister' (*The Independent*, 30th August 2003)

The headlines above refer to the recent resignation of Alastair Campbell, the 'real Deputy Prime Minister' (*The Guardian*, 29th August 2003) and British Prime Minister Tony Blair's most trusted advisor over a ten year period during which Blair went from being Leader of the Opposition to being the only Labour Prime Minister to win two successive elections. Campbell's significance will be examined later in this chapter. For now it is enough to note that the kind of media story, indicated by the headlines from *The Times* and *The Independent*, is

part of a pattern. In fact, it seems that almost every week public relations is pilloried for its role in contaminating and corrupting the political process in Britain. Spin doctoring, negative campaigning, and the pernicious influence of lobbyists are all highlighted as examples of how public relations has degraded the political process. There are frequent calls to return to a type of political activity where somewhat dubious persuasive tactics had no place. Headlines in the press like those quoted above are nothing new and periodically there are obituary's vis-à-vis 'spin', for example; 'Blair ally: we must end spin' (*The Observer* 16th June 2002), 'Prescott bins the spin for real policies' (*The Independent*)ⁱ. This presumption, frequently asserted by the media and politicians, implying a tainting effect of public relations on British political culture, should be questioned. Indeed, it could be argued, the media, politicians and public relations specialists are increasingly bound together in a relationship that the media and politicians find more beneficial than they care to admit.

Any discussion of the role of public relations within the political sphere naturally falls into two sections, the use of public relations practices by Government and the use of public relations practices by non-governmental actors, or lobbyists, in the political process. This chapter will discuss the role of political public relations in Western democracies with a particular focus on governmental bodies within the United Kingdom. A later chapter in this book (chapter 8) will discuss lobbying. The first three sections of this chapter will assess the increasing importance of public relations specialists in government communications in Britain and will focus particularly on several forms of media management and information management techniques employed by government public relations practitioners. As noted above, there will be a discussion of the recent case of Tony Blair's chief advisor, Alastair Campbell, as an illustrative example of the kind of controversy this activity generates. The issue of the interdependence of public relations and the media will also be assessed in regard

to how this affects the political process in the British state. The penultimate section in the chapter will discuss recent attempts to develop a 'Grunigian' model of government public relations. An important recent constitutional development in the UK is the establishment of the devolved structures. The final section of this chapter will focus on the Scottish Parliament and whether or not the communication processes surrounding this institution (with the stated aims of *accessibility* and *accountability*) offer an alternative to the existing political culture in Britain.

Government public relations in democratic societies

Whilst the government's 'management' of the media on a day-to-day basis is the focus of this chapter, it is self-evident that political parties must win elections to take or maintain power. So, while this chapter will not discuss electioneering in detail, it is worth noting that it is in relation to election contests that the changing nature of communicative activity surrounding democratic politics is sometimes thrown into sharpest relief. The 'buying in' of media management and promotional expertise is increasingly a feature of contemporary political campaigns around the world. Several recent studies of political communication during election campaigns have highlighted similar themes with regard to the role of public relations and political advertising.

For Boris Yeltsin's referendum campaign, Saatchi and Saatchi were invited by . . . Yeltsin's pollsters, to accompany Gallup Poll and Matrix Public Relations on a research study among Russian voters. We were then asked to present recommendations to help Yeltsin. (Hilton, 1993, p. 24, quoted in Negrine, 1996, p.146)

The victory of Ernest 'the bull' Pérez Balladares in the Panamanian presidential elections . . . marks the second time in a fortnight that Saatchi and Saatchi has won an election in central America. (Gunson, 1994, p.11, quoted in Negrine, 1996, p.146)

It is not just in the West that public relations is credited with a central role in the capturing and maintaining of political power. From political cultures as different as Russia and Central America it would appear that it is not ideas or personalities which win elections but Anglo-American advertising and public relations companies. Saatchi and Saatchi are, in a British context, most famous for their political advertising campaigns on behalf of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government but it is important to remember that the company were also significantly involved in the related area of public relations.

Whilst the role of public relations in election campaigns is not central to the present discussion, it should be recognised that the expansion of the role of the public relations specialist in elections is part of a wider trend. This is reflected in the expansion of the role of public relations specialists in the day-to-day relationship between the media and the government. British politicians, and especially the government, are, in many ways, at the heart of the news machine and television news, in particular, feeds us a constant daily diet of stories about Westminster, Whitehall and the devolved Parliaments. Knight and Curtis (1987) note that 'News prioritises the state and its agents, treating even minor state activities as inherently newsworthy, viewing agents of the state as 'reliable' sources and as interesting speakers and portraying the visible aspects of relations among states' (p. 49). Why is there this willingness by news organisations, particularly television news broadcasts, to devote so much time to political news stories? To an extent the answer to this question lies in the success of 'political public relations' (McNair, 1994) and more specifically to the success recent British

governments have had in *media management* and *information management*.ⁱⁱ The two processes are, of course, intimately related but for the purposes of the ensuing discussion they will be discussed as separate activities.

Media Management

The relationship between politicians and the media, and more importantly between the government and the media, will obviously involve a struggle between what are apparently two different sets of interests. The journalist is supposed to be attempting to seek out and present the facts while the politician will want to ensure that a news story reflects the 'message' that she wishes to convey. There is nothing particularly new in the attempt of the political elites to try and control media representations, as is revealed in various accounts of the development and growth of political public relations from the early years of the 20th century onwards (Pearson, 1992; McNair, 1994, L'Etang, 1999ⁱⁱⁱ). However this discussion will focus on the role of public relations over the past two decades in Britain, a period which witnessed a rapid transformation in the role and status of public relations within political culture. This expansion of public relations activity has unsurprisingly been accompanied by an increasing reliance upon media management strategies. Some commentators (Franklin, 1994; McNair, 1994, 1998) have pointed to the increasing use of the 'soundbite' and the 'pseudo-event'^{iv} as key strategies used by politicians to control media representations of them and their policies.

Soundbites and pseudo-events

We noted earlier that the 'news machine', and particularly the television news, spends an enormous portion of its time focusing on the political sphere, and journalists, like most

people with tight deadlines, find it hard to resist if their news gathering task is made easier for them. Cockerell *et al.* (1985) note that, in reference to the workings of the British Parliament, 'Very few journalists have had the incentive to dig deeper, to mine the bedrock of power rather than merely scour its topsoil' (p.11). It is the broadcast journalists' 'job' to pick out the key details or important points of any political event or speech. If that task is made easier, if the speech contains memorable phrases (soundbites) which summarise the main points, then there is a good chance that these portions of the speech will be selected and broadcast on the few minutes allotted to 'story' on the broadcast news bulletins. Tony Blair's phrase 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' from a speech made when he was Shadow Home Secretary has entered the national consciousness. It is indeed a memorable phrase, but it is important to remember that being 'tough' and talking about being 'tough' was a carefully constructed aspect of the Blair style. Fairclough (2000) argues that 'Blair's "toughness" has been self-consciously built into his communicative style as a matter of policy and strategy' (p.8).

McNair (1994) points out that many political speeches, which increasingly tend to be loaded with soundbites, occur within the context of the 'pseudo-event', by which he means the staged rally or the strictly controlled party conference. Obviously this kind of political pseudo-event has a long history from Caesar entering Rome, after another famous military victory, to the Nuremburg rallies in 1930s Germany. Nevertheless, the impression of a united and adoring audience exulting in the great and powerful leader is memorable and again creates an easy, if rather shallow, 'story' for the few allotted minutes on the television news agenda.

In Britain in the 1980s, the Conservative Party, which was in government throughout the decade, increasingly offered this image of a united party behind a strong leader, Margaret Thatcher. Speeches by Thatcher and the Tory hierarchy at their party conferences were largely

successful in supplying the television news organisations with 'easily-reportable "bits" of political information' (McNair, 1994, p.120) which tended to set the news agenda in the party's favour. By contrast, during much of the 1980s the Labour party was presented in the media as being in a state of at best, disarray, at worst, total disintegration. After its election defeat in 1979, Labour, as one would expect, went through a period of internal 'ideological' conflict and, at times, damaging splits occurred (several leading members of the Party left and formed the Social Democratic Party). Bitter internal conflicts tended to be fought out at party conferences and the Labour Party leadership found it difficult to impose control over events. Media organisations looking for a representative few minutes for the news bulletins tended to reflect this bitter infighting and there was little concerted attempt by the Labour Party leadership to influence, let alone manage, the news agenda. The contrast with the Tory Party, during the 1980s, was stark. The perception was that the Tories were united, Labour were divided; the Tories had a strong leader, Labour had a series of weak and ineffectual leaders; the Tories were in control of events, Labour were at the mercy of them, and so on. The tightly controlled and carefully staged party conferences allowed the leadership of the Conservative Party to successfully manage media representations of them for a significant period of time. Behind the scenes the party elite was far from united behind the powerful leader, but it was *behind* the scenes where the personal and ideological disagreement, and the subsequent bloodletting, occurred. Ministers were frequently sacked for being disloyal, that is, disagreeing with Margaret Thatcher, and it is clear that bitterness and rancour had existed within the Tory Party as it had within the Labour Party. Yet the fact that the media seemed to be caught by surprise by the eventual internal *coup d'état* which ousted Thatcher as Party leader, and British Prime Minister, only reveals how successfully the media had been 'managed' for much of her rule.

By the early 1990s the Labour Party led by Neil Kinnock, and under the guidance of political public relations specialists like Peter Mandelson, were attempting to emulate the success that the Tory Party were having in managing the media and setting news agendas. There were significant failures in their attempts to stage manage media opportunities (McNair, 1994, p.121) but on the whole the Labour Party's media managers learned from their mistakes and, for most of the decade, including the general election success of 1997, Labour were very successful at managing the media.

Spindoctoring

In most accounts of recent Labour success in media management the role of 'media spin' and, in particular, Tony Blair's formidable 'spin doctor' Alastair Campbell, are highlighted. Several authors (Jones, 1999; Fairclough, 2000) have discussed the media management surrounding the Government's welfare 'reforms' as a case study which illustrates 'New Labour's management of news and "media spin"' (Fairclough, 2000, p.129). Early in their tenure^v Labour opted to launch a 'welfare roadshow' in a bid to attempt to control the news agenda with Tony Blair going 'on the road' to put his case for welfare reform to the people of Britain. Blair's first speech was in Dudley, and the day before this speech Alastair Campbell gave private briefings to the media in which he emphasised, with a battery of facts and figures, the costs to the nation, of benefit fraud. The next day - the official launch of the welfare roadshow - two national newspapers, *The Times* and the *Mirror*, carried articles 'written' by Tony Blair which were virtually indistinguishable from the briefing Campbell had given the day before. That evening, in Dudley, Blair's speech again reinforced the message, with virtually the same language, that he was determined to do something about benefit fraud. Fairclough (2000) notes that:

The risk of unpredictable and uncontrollable media uptake of the speech is minimised

by trailing the speech in a way which presents it in the way the Government wants it to be seen - which puts a particular 'spin' on it (p.130).

This was of course only the beginning of the welfare reform process which proceeded through a 'consultation'^{vi} stage and eventually to a Bill presented to the Westminster Parliament. Fairclough (2000) argues that the whole process, from initial campaign, through the consultative stage, to the presentation of the Bill to Parliament, was 'largely managed through managerial and promotional means rather than democratically through dialogue' (p.129). 'Part of the art of "spin"', according to Fairclough (2000), 'is calculating what additional emphases and foregrounding newspapers . . . will predictably add, which may be an effective way for the Government to convey implicitly messages it may not wish to convey explicitly' (p.131). In the case of the welfare reform legislation, issues surrounding benefit fraud were only a small part of the Bill but there was a constant stream of messages about how Tony Blair would 'get tough' on benefit fraud. This allowed politically conservative newspapers like the *Daily Mail* to use headlines like 'Welfare: The Crackdown'. Fairclough (2000) suggests that the *Daily Mail* report 'effects certain transformations which significantly and (from a press officer's perspective) predictably convey a "tougher" message than Blair's' (p.131), but the key point is that this 'message' will reassure the *Daily Mail's* largely Tory readership.

Spinning out of control: Alastair Campbell and the intelligence dossiers

The very effective use of media management or 'spin' in the example discussed above shows its significance and importance in domestic political issues. Interestingly, with respect to issues which step outside the domestic political arena, attempts to manage and control media agendas have been much less successful. Two recent examples highlight this: the debate over joining the euro zone and the 2003 war against Iraq. One obvious reason why policies which are not purely domestic are more difficult to control, from a media management

perspective, is the fact that there are many more actors (partners/opponents/neutral states) involved in these events. These other actors may have different priorities, and, of course, have their own domestic media to manage, thus how events are represented in the British media are of minor importance to them.

Taking the 2003 conflict in Iraq^{vii} as an example, it could be argued that the formidable New Labour reputation for managing media representations of their policies has been significantly damaged. Attempts to apply media management techniques which have served them well domestically, such as the positioning of key soundbites and the dissemination of 'source material' for the media to consume and reproduce has in fact had the effect of turning media attention on the whole apparatus of spin itself. This has had serious consequences for the Blair administration and in particular for the man who became known as the 'spinmeister', Alastair Campbell, who has been forced to resign as the British Prime Minister's communications director^{viii}.

McNair (1998) notes that a key 'extramedia' factor in influencing media agendas and media content is the production of *sources*, so that media agendas and content can be seen to be 'in significant part the product of the communicative work of non-journalistic social actors' (p. 143). Miller and Williams (1993) note that any attempt to understand news coverage and how news agendas and content emerge makes it 'necessary to examine the strategies formulated by sources of information to influence and use the news media' (p. 3). The 'source professional' McNair points out is a significant development in the 20th century following 'in the wake of the media's rapid expansion, feeding the latter's insatiable desire for new material to package as news and entertainment' (1998, p. 143). McNair adds that the source professional is 'engaged in a fiercely competitive struggle with the journalists to define the terms of media coverage' (1998, p. 144).

Nations need reasons to go to war and in democratic societies there is usually the recognition by governments that the majority of the public must be convinced that these reasons are legitimate. In the build up to the 2003 Iraqi conflict the British Government needed to communicate its reasons for going to war effectively to the British public. This is the context of the intelligence dossiers which were released to the Press on 24th September 2002 and 3rd February 2003. These documents set out the reasons why, according to the British Government, it was necessary to take action against Saddam Hussein's regime.

Tony Blair himself explained the genesis of the September 2002 dossier in the foreword to that document:

The document published today is based, in large part, on the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). The JIC is at the heart of British intelligence machinery. It is chaired by the Cabinet Office and made up of the heads of the UK's three Intelligence and Security Agencies, the Chief of Defence Intelligence, and senior officials from key government departments. (*Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government.*)

The intelligence dossiers were thus constructed chiefly by the JIC who collate and interpret information from a range of intelligence sources and which is chaired by the Cabinet Office. The executive summary of the September 2002 document emphasised several key points. Firstly, Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Secondly, he was prepared to use them against the West. Thirdly, they could be mobilised in 45 minutes.

It is not my intention here to reiterate the history of events after the government dossiers were put in the public domain. It is enough to say that one of the key functions of these documents was to provide key information for the British media to disseminate. As it turned

out, the main points emphasised by the dossiers were not simply reproduced but rather were intensely scrutinised by the media which attempted to assess the accuracy and identify the sources of the information. BBC journalists in particular questioned whether the claims made in the September 2002 dossier represented the genuine views of the British intelligence services or whether they had been 'sexed up'^{ix} by Alastair Campbell who, it transpired, had actually chaired a meeting on intelligence matters at one point. Scrutiny of the February 2003 dossier entitled *Iraq – its infrastructure of concealment, deception and intimidation*, led to the media discovering that sections of this document had been plagiarised. Embarrassingly unattributed excerpts from a Californian student's PhD thesis (available on the Internet) and from articles in the defence journal *Jane's Intelligence Review*, had been cut and pasted into the dossier.^x

The issues surrounding the decision to go to war were discussed by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee which subsequently published a report on 7th July 2003 entitled *The Decision to Go to War in Iraq*. This report arrived at several conclusions and recommendations which called into question some of the claims in the September 2002 dossier and Alastair Campbell's role in the process of constructing the February 2003 dossier. It should be noted that the report stated that: 'We conclude on the evidence available to us Alastair Campbell did not exert or seek to exert improper influence on the drafting of the September dossier' (Paragraph 84) and '[We] conclude that Ministers did not mislead Parliament' (Paragraph 188). However other conclusions reached by the report made less pleasant reading for Alastair Campbell and the Government:

We conclude that the 45 minutes claim did not warrant the prominence given to it in the dossier, because it was based on intelligence from a single, uncorroborated source. We

recommend that the Government explain why the claim was given such prominence. (Paragraph 70).

We conclude that it was wrong for Alastair Campbell or any Special Adviser to have chaired a meeting on an intelligence matter, and we recommend that this practice cease. (Paragraph 79)

We conclude that the degree of autonomy given to the Iraqi Communications Group chaired by Alastair Campbell and the Coalition Information Centre which reported to him, as well as the lack of procedural accountability, were contributory factors to the affair of the 'dodgy dossier'. (Paragraph 122)

We conclude that the effect of the February dossier was almost wholly counterproductive. By producing such a document the Government undermined the credibility of their case for war and of the other documents which were part of it. (Paragraph 138)

It is clear that this report, whether questioning some of his activities or absolving him of some of the allegations made against him, had the effect of turning a great deal of attention upon Alastair Campbell. More than anything else it was this turning of the media spotlight on Campbell, of making him the story, that began the process that eventually led to his resignation on 28th August 2003. Whether or not Campbell attempted to manipulate the intelligence dossiers and thus provide source material for media agendas which the British Government wished to see pursued is a question which was central to the deliberations Hutton Inquiry.^{xi} The effect of the departure of Alastair Campbell in respect to the 'spin culture', which

some argue has dominated government media relations in recent times, has divided commentators. George Pitcher, author of *The Death of Spin* notes:

[Campbell] has been a symptom rather than a cause of the spin culture we live in. It's something that has developed over the past decade and that he – and others – have exploited. His departure is a watershed in the end of that culture. We will be moving on, not because of his departure, but because of a growing desire on the part of all of us to move beyond spin. (*The Observer*, 31st August 2003, p. 16).

A rather different assessment is given by Daniel Finkelstein, the Director of Research for John Major, the last Conservative Prime Minister of the UK. Finkelstein notes that: 'All political parties and all governments spin. And there is nothing wrong with it' (*The Times*, 30th August 2003, p. 6). It remains to be seen as to which judgement will prove to be the more realistic. However looking back over recent political history it could be argued that using 'spin' to convey certain kinds of messages and to produce certain kinds of 'readings' of government legislation or policy is a key media management technique which British governments are unlikely to relinquish.

Information management

All democratically elected governments must communicate with their electorates. After all, in most theories of democratic government there is an assumption that the government is the servant of the people, elected to carry out its will. Just because governments have this duty to provide information to the general public does not mean of course that they will not attempt to control and manipulate the amount of, and kinds of, information they disseminate. Information management in regard to government simply means the processes and procedures by which governmental agencies disseminate the kind of information they want us to receive.

The public relations state?

It is an inescapable fact that throughout the 1980s and 1990s there have been massive increases in resources devoted to the aspect of Government administration responsible for information management. For example, 'Whitehall and Downing Street now employ 1,200 press officers with a combined budget estimated to approach two hundred million pounds' (Budge *et al.*, 1998, p. 315).

Many commentators note how careful management of information turns it into a very valuable resource. Cockerall *et al.* (1984) suggest that what government 'chooses to tell us through its public relations machine is one thing; the information in use by participants in the country's real government is another' (p.9). Negrine (1996) notes the 'increasing use of carefully crafted communication strategies by governments to ensure that . . . the information they seek to impart to their citizens has an appropriate "spin" on it' (p.10). Obviously this increased use of public relations specialists by the Government may merely reflect a more general 'promotional culture' in Britain (Miller, 1998). However some observers have expressed disquiet at the increasing use of information management techniques by the Government. Deacon and Golding (1994) have noted with concern the rise of the 'public relations state' (p.7) and Schlesinger (1990) notes that there are important questions

about the nature of information management in a society by a variety of groups in conditions of unequal power and therefore unequal access to systems of information production and distribution and these questions are particularly acute in regard to government because 'the apparatuses of the state . . . enjoy privileged access to the media' (p. 82).

There are various ways in which governments manage information in order to privilege their own views on an issue. Leaks^{xii} of important information, or even important documents, are one way in which the Government or powerful interest groups within the state may attempt

to control the media agenda, but perhaps the key weapon in the Government's information management armoury is the 'Lobby' system.

The Lobby

The Lobby^{xiii} - so called because journalists used to assemble in the Member's Lobby of the House of Commons - has been described as 'the Prime Minister's most useful tool for the political management of the news' (Cockerall *et al.*, 1984, p.33).

This system is a very important resource that British governments use - and it could be argued abuse - for keeping control of information flows to the media and hence to the general public. It is also clear, despite claims to the contrary by those who have utilised it,^{xiv} that it is a unique system within Western democracies. This does not mean that other governments do not attempt to manage information - of course they do - but it is normal practice to appoint a party political spokesperson who openly represents the government position and is attributable. Not so in Britain, the Government Press Officer is actually a member of the Civil Service, and thus officially politically neutral, and uniquely, deals with the media through a kind of secretive 'ritualistic process' (Franklin, 1994, p.87). Cockerell *et al.* (1984) argues that the Lobby system 'mirrors the secrecy that surrounds so much of the government in Whitehall and allows the government of the day to present its own unchallenged versions of reality' (Cockerell p. 42).

All of the national newspapers and television and radio broadcasters are represented in the Lobby where they are usually briefed by the Prime Minister's Press Secretary. Cockerall *et al.* note that 'what the Press Secretary says at these briefings is what the Prime Minister wants the press, radio and television to report' (1984, p.33). Franklin (1994) argues that a key change occurred in the Lobby system in the post-war period which involved the '*codification* of a set of

rules enforcing the non-attribution of news sources while simultaneously obliging journalists to rely on a single source, usually the Prime Minister's Press Secretary' (p.86). In effect the Lobby became a Government press conference which could dispense unattributable information. Franklin (1994) points out that when a Government Press Secretary gives a briefing there is a strong likelihood that it will appear as a news item, 'replete with the political spin he places on it' (p.86). Clearly the Lobby works well for the media, in the sense that it is relatively easy to obtain a news 'story' in time for the evening news or the morning editions. It also works well for the government of the day by providing a system of information management which allows it to control and structure the media's political news agendas. However Hennessy (1987) condemns the practice as not working in the interests of anyone else. He argues that 'any system of mass non-attributable briefings is a restrictive practice rigged for the benefit and convenience of the givers and receivers of information and against the interests of the consumer - the reader, the listener, the viewer and the voter' (p.14 quoted in Franklin, 1994, p.91).

Political public relations and the media: interdependence or dependency?

Franklin (1994) notes that representatives of the media like to present the media as constituting the *fourth estate* 'which subjects all aspects of political life to close scrutiny and is consequently a key mechanism for securing the accountability of politicians to the general public' (p.3). He points out, however, that these 'watchdogs' are viewed by those critical of British political culture as little more than 'lapdogs'. He notes that 'Marxists identify the media as central agencies in the construction of a social and political consensus, encouraging the acquiescence of the public, by distributing and reinforcing the values and beliefs of the

dominant social and political group within society' (Franklin, 1994, p.3). Whilst, it could be argued, that the media are not necessarily dominated by politicians in any direct or conspiratorial way, the way in which the British political sphere is constructed and maintained by both the media and the politicians somewhat undermines any suggestion that the media constitute the fourth estate.

Nevertheless it is sometimes claimed that there is a mutual interdependence of politicians and the media. Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's former Press Secretary, suggested that the relationship is 'essentially cannibalistic. They feed off each other but no one knows who is next on the menu' (Ingham, 1990 quoted in Franklin, 1994, p.14). Ingham's metaphor may seem outlandish but it is clear that the relationship between the media and politicians is in some senses a symbiotic one. Politicians in general, and government public relations specialists in particular, obviously rely on the media to communicate with the general public. But it must be said that broadcasters and journalists understand that without a degree of co-operation from politicians, political journalism would be difficult, if not impossible.

However, other commentators would argue that with the advent of 'media managers' in Western democracies like Britain the politician-media relationship has been pushed beyond the 'state of mutual interdependence to one of *media dependence* on, and deference to, politicians' (McNair, 1994, p.115). Whether or not one agrees that the relationship is one of media dependency a cursory look at media ownership in the UK would indicate that the media are not independent of powerful economic and political interests in British society (Negrine, 1994). It is also obviously the case that ultimately broadcasting and press 'freedoms' are at the mercy of the legislative process. In Britain, as noted above, this relationship is epitomised by the Westminster 'Lobby' which, while it involves some degree of mutual interdependence,

tends ultimately to allow government media managers a great deal of control in structuring news agendas.

The situation in Britain obviously suits the government, but it does have a downside in that it leads to a level of mistrust and cynicism about the kind of information governments disseminate. There is an obvious tension between controlling the information flows for one's own benefit and structuring news agendas to such an extent that everything you say is treated as 'spin'. As we have seen, at the heart of this debate is the role of government public relations and it has been argued that governments, and government public relations specialists in many Western democracies are practising a type of public relations which stifles 'open' government and leads to distrust amongst the electorate. It should be no surprise to students of public relations to find James Grunig arguing that in certain Western democracies, what he describes as, 'asymmetrical' government communication activities need to be replaced by a symmetrical model.

Symmetrical government public relations

Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) argue that government public relations is different depending on which Western democracy you analyse. They suggest that governmental organisations in the USA are more likely to practise a 'public information model'^{xv} of public relations. The reason for this one-way information-based communication approach is because they have a *pluralistic* view of government. Other countries, such as Canada and Norway, practice strategic, two-way communication because the perspective underpinning governmental communication in these countries is *societal corporatist*. Unsurprisingly Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) conclude that in order to adhere to the generic principles of 'excellent'

public relations - that is, strategic, symmetrical public relations – a governmental agency needs ‘to view its relationship with publics from a societal corporatist perspective rather than from a pluralist perspective’ (p.219). But what precisely do these authors mean by ‘pluralist’ and ‘societal corporatist’ perspectives of government public relations?

Pluralism versus Societal Corporatism

Grunig and Jaatinen’s (1999) suggest that pluralist theorists understand the relationship between ‘government agencies and publics as one of competition - a competition among interest groups for access to government funds and services’ (p.223). The role of ‘government agencies’ is defined rather differently here than in most pluralist theories which view the government as a kind of referee, in what the English philosopher John Stuart Mill called the ‘free market place of ideas’ (Moloney, 1996, p.23). Nevertheless the idea of competing interest groups is at the heart of pluralist theory and this is reflected in the above definition.

Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) make the point that a ‘societal corporatist’ system is distinct from a ‘corporatist’ system. They argue that a ‘corporatist political system can be dangerous to democracy if either government agencies or publics dominate the other or collaborate to achieve their mutual interests at the expense of other groups in society’ (p.224). However in a societal corporatist system ‘government agencies collaborate and bargain with publics they are supposed to serve or regulate to balance the interests of those publics and society at large through symmetrical communication’ (p.224). The types of relationships epitomised by societal corporatism ‘embody collectivist collaboration rather than individualistic competition’ (p.224).

In regard to communication strategies Grunig and Jaatinen would argue that the pluralist, corporatist and societal corporatist perspectives all have significant effects on how governments and government agencies interact with their publics. They note:

Government agencies in the pluralist sphere do not need to practise strategic public relations because they expect activist groups to come to them for services; and the agency has no need to identify them. In pure corporatism, the agency typically chooses to collaborate with the most powerful interest groups; and little strategic management is needed to identify them. In societal corporatism, however, the agency must engage in environmental scanning and other forms of strategic public relations to identify those groups with whom it has a responsibility to interact – in the interests of those groups, the government and society at large (1999, p.227).

It is clear that for Grunig and Jaatinen a theory of government public relations must be not only be built upon the generic principles of 'excellence' in public relations but must also include the principles of societal corporatism.

Grunig and Jaatinen suggest that government communication policies in countries like Norway and Canada reflect these principles of societal corporatism, whereas countries like the USA and the UK tend to operate from within a pluralist perspective. Whether or not one agrees with their conclusion that governmental communication requires an application of the 'excellence' principles within a framework of societal corporatism it would be difficult to argue that the approach of the UK government to communicating with the general public reflects open, participative, symmetrical communication practice. However, in the UK in the past couple of years there have been significant changes to the political landscape. In Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, devolved Parliaments and Assemblies have been set up. The final section of this chapter will focus on the new Scottish Parliament and discuss whether or

not the constitutional changes have created an opportunity to change government communication practice.

Government public relations and Scottish Devolution

Following elections in June 1999 political structures in the United Kingdom changed in the most significant way since the Act of Union in 1707. For first time since that date, Scotland elected a legislative parliament in its capital city, Edinburgh. This final section of the chapter will focus upon the particular case of the Scottish Parliament and the argument that the political culture it represents is a conscious attempt to replace the Westminster model with a more open, accountable and participative system.

In July 1997 the British government published its devolution White Paper, *Scotland's Parliament*. Shortly after this, on 11 September 1997, there was a two-question referendum in which Scotland's voters were asked to decide whether there should be a Scottish Parliament and whether this Parliament should have tax varying powers. The 'Yes-Yes' campaign was backed by the three political parties in Scotland which had representation at Westminster, and the European Parliament, the pro-devolution Labour and Liberal Democrats and the pro-independence Scottish National Party. It was opposed by the Conservative Party which had recently lost all its Scottish seats at Westminster and the European Parliament. Of the Scottish electorate who voted (60.4 per cent of those eligible) 74.3 per cent supported the creation of a Scottish Parliament and 63.5 per cent agreed that the proposed Parliament should have tax-varying powers.

The Scottish Parliament has legislative control, in Scotland, over areas such as health, education, local government, economic development and transport, environment, agriculture, forestry and fishing, law and home affairs, sport and the arts, and will be able to vary upwards

or downwards the basic rate of income tax applicable in Scotland by up to 3 pence in the pound, with proceeds adding to, or reducing, the Parliament's spending power. The devolved Parliament will not be responsible for legislation for such areas as constitutional matters, UK financial matters, foreign policy, defence, social security and broadcasting^{xvi}.

At the first Scottish Parliamentary elections, on May 6th 1999, 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) were elected, 73 were elected by the first-past-the-post system in existing Westminster constituencies^{xvii}, the remaining 56 members were elected from party lists via an additional member voting system with seven seats from each of the eight European parliamentary constituencies. Labour was the largest party and formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrat Party who came fourth just behind the Conservative Party. The Scottish National Party came second and took up the role of opposition along with the Conservatives, a Scottish Socialist Party MSP and the first Green Party candidate to be elected to a UK Parliament. The second Scottish Parliamentary elections, on May 1st 2003, produced similar results to the first election with the most significant changes affecting only the smaller parties which increased their representation.^{xviii}

Accompanying these political developments in Scotland there have been significant statements relating to how the whole mechanism of political communication is expected to operate in this new political culture. Donald Dewar, the Parliament's First Minister,^{xix} publicly stated in regard to political reporting: 'We are not likely to wish to recreate the lobby system' (quoted in Schlesinger, 1998, p.69). Before the setting up of the Scottish Parliament an all-Party Consultative Steering Group (CSG) chaired by Henry McLeish, the then Minister for Devolution in the Scottish Office, was charged with gathering views on how the Parliament would operate. The CSG Report, which outlined comprehensive proposals for the working of

the new Parliament, was published on 15 January 1999. The CSG Report identified four key principles:

- the Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators (the Members of the Scottish Parliament) and the Scottish Executive (the Scottish Ministers);
- the Scottish Executive should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament and the Parliament and Executive should be accountable to the people of Scotland;
- the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation;
- the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointments should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all.^{xx}

In the new Scottish political system it is not just the executive which has the power to initiate legislation. This is also a power vested in Parliamentary committees which are made up of between 5 and 15 MSPs selected according to the balance of the various political parties and groupings in the Parliament. Meetings of the Parliament's committees are normally held in public and can take place anywhere in Scotland. One of the reasons given for using a committee system for much of the work of the Scottish Parliament is that it was felt that this would 'encourage significant public involvement in the Parliament's activities'.^{xxi}

Conclusion

Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) would undoubtedly view the principles underpinning the new devolved political system in Scotland as a manifestation of a societal corporatist perspective and it is clear that it represents a departure from the existing British political culture. Phillip Schlesinger (1998) remarked that 'the very prospect of

Scotland's parliament is promoting the creation of an increasingly distinctive political culture, one that defines itself as *not-Westminster*' (p.71). It could be argued that in its first term the Scottish Parliament did function differently to the Westminster Parliament in some important ways. The opportunity to create legislation which was not sponsored or controlled by the Executive was utilised to some extent. The *2001-2002 Annual Report* of the Scottish Parliament noted that; '[M]ost of the bills introduced into the Scottish Parliament came from the Executive. . . . However, an increasing number of bills are now coming from non-Executive sources. These include bills from Parliamentary Committees and from individual members'.^{xxii}

However, some commentators have argued that there is evidence of the importation of practices from the Westminster system; '[W]hat is striking, . . . is the extent to which Scotland's system of political communication has been an adaptation of the tried and often mistrusted models of Westminster and Whitehall practise' (Schlesinger, *et al*, 2001, p. viii). It is clear however that the target of this critique is not so much the Scottish Parliament but the Scottish Executive:

The confusion in the public debate between the Parliament and the Executive has masked the real seat of power in the Executive. Our research suggests that it is the Executive that stands most in need of reform if we are to move toward an open Scotland. (Schlesinger, *et al*, 2001, p. 265)

These issues have come to a head in the aftermath of the election of the second Scottish Parliament with claims that the major established political parties are attempting to curb the legislative making capacity of the smaller parties. Murray Ritchie, Scottish Political Editor of *The Herald*, noted that the major parties have been accused 'of planning to cut the number of bills from back benchers in a move condemned as attacking a "fundamental freedom" of the Scottish Parliament' (*The Herald*, 1st October 2003).

The debate about the role and nature of the Scottish Parliament vis-à-vis the Scottish Executive has also emerged in discussion surrounding proposals contained in a *Scottish Office Consultation Document* which explores the possibility of cutting the number of MSP's elected to the Scottish Parliament.^{xxiii} This idea led to a response by the Institute of Governance at the University of Edinburgh which argued:

It is vital to understand the Scottish Parliament in context, notably its history and evolution. The relationship between the Scottish Executive, the Parliament and civil society is the key to the central principle of power-sharing in Scotland. Our research indicates that this key relationship of governance is different and, we would argue, healthier than the one operating at Westminster.^{xxiv}

The Institute of Governance point out that cutting the number of MSP's will result in a reduced number of parliamentary committees. They argue that this will have important implications for the concept of a participative democracy in Scotland. According to Institute of Governance 'the work of parliamentary committees is of particular importance. One distinctive aspect of this is their role as key conduits for inserting civic ideas into legislative debates.'^{xxv} They suggest that the role of the Scottish Parliament is the key to democratising Scotland: 'The Scottish Parliament is the hinge in [the] democratising process – between the state (especially in the form of the Scottish Executive), and the people of Scotland. Weakening the parliament would weaken the whole process.'^{xxvi} It is clear that the outcome of this review will be a key factor in determining the future of Scottish governance. Those who suggest that it is the Scottish Executive rather than the Parliament which needs to be reformed argue that this is the only way to ensure that the principles of openness, accountability and accessibility will be achieved. This debate will be of importance not just for Scotland but for governance in the UK as a whole. A strong Parliament may also be the best safeguard to ensure that government agencies in a devolved Scotland will resist the temptation to exert the kind of control over information flows that is evident at Westminster and sustain the more symmetrical communication model outlined in the CSG Report.

Questions for Discussion

1. What evidence is there for the growth of the 'public relations state' (Deacon and Golding, 1994)?
2. Is the use of specialist government media advisors a necessary element in contemporary democratic societies?
3. Do you agree with Fairclough (2000) that democratic dialogue is being replaced with a 'managerial and promotional' approach to the political process in the UK?
4. How might the principles of symmetrical communication be promoted in British political culture?
5. Examine a media campaign surrounding a current policy initiative by the British Government. In what ways have politicians and their media advisors attempted to 'manage' the British media to achieve the maximum favourable coverage of their policy?

ⁱFor a discussion of the Prescott claim see Fairclough (2000), p. 1-3.

ⁱⁱMcNair (1994) helpfully provides a typology of political public relations activity which is useful in that it utilises terminology which most students of public relations should be familiar with. He notes that political public relations involves four specific types of activity: *media management* (which he regards as something akin to issues management); *image-management*; *internal communications*; and *information management*. While recognising the conceptual and practical distinctions McNair draws, for the purposes of the present discussion I have subsumed the first three activities McNair refers to into the general category of media management.

ⁱⁱⁱAn excellent account of the growth of the public relations industry in Britain and its relationship to government is provided in L'Etang, J., (1998) 'State Propaganda and Bureaucratic Intelligence: The Creation of Public Relations in 20th Century Britain' in *Public Relations Review*, Volume 24, Issue 4, pp. 413-441.

^{iv}The term 'pseudo-event' was coined by Boorstin (1962).

^vThis process began in 1998 and the Welfare Reform Bill was eventually published on 11th February 1999.

^{vi}British Governments publish a 'Green Paper' before constructing a 'Bill' to set before Parliament. Interested parties respond to the Green Paper and are supposed to have a say in how legislation is framed. Fairclough (2000, p.132-141) provides a useful discourse analysis of the text of the Green Paper on welfare reform.

^{vii}This was declared over on May 1st 2003 by US President George Bush but since then the coalition forces have lost more troops in 'peace keeping' duties than they did in the actual duration of the 'war'.

^{viii}Campbell announced his decision to leave his post on the 29th August 2003.

^{ix}Andrew Gilligan claimed the government had 'sexed up' the dossier on BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme. He subsequently gave evidence to the Hutton inquiry (see endnote 11) stating that Dr David Kelly had confirmed to him that Alastair Campbell had 'transformed' the document to make it 'sexier' (*The Guardian*, August 12th).

^xSerious allegations were made in the media about the contents of both documents but it is the second one, published in February 2003, that was referred to as the 'dodgy dossier' in the Foreign Affairs Committee Report 7th July 2003 Paragraph 122.

^{xi}The Hutton inquiry's counsel, James Dingemans, stated that during the second and final phase of its probe into the circumstances surrounding the death of government weapons expert, Dr David Kelly, the inquiry hoped to answer 15 key questions. Question 4 was: 'Were the Prime Minister, his communications chief Alastair Campbell and others in Number 10 responsible for intelligence being set out in the dossier which was incorrect or misleading or to which improper emphasis was given?' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3109826). When eventually published on 28th January 2004 the Hutton Inquiry astonished most commentators by largely exonerating the British Government and Alastair Campbell of any wrongdoing in respect to the intelligence dossier and censuring the BBC. Alastair Campbell was mildly rebuked by Lord Hutton who noted that the tone of Campbell's complaints to the BBC raised the 'temperature' of the dispute. Lord Hutton also stated that the BBC editorial system was 'defective' and that the BBC governors should have investigated further the differences between Gilligan's notes and his report, and that should have led them to question whether it was in the public interest to broadcast his report relying only on his notes.

^{xii}For some interesting case studies of the British Government's use of leaks in relation to issues surrounding British Coal, Northern Ireland and the sale of the Rover car group to British Aerospace see Negrine, 1996, pp. 39-51.

^{xiii}It should be noted that changes to the Lobby system were introduced by Alastair Campbell in May 2002 – toward a US style press conference. These changes were welcomed by some as an end to the Lobby but many commentators expressed doubts as to whether it really marked an end to the systematic practice of favoured journalists being given more revealing briefings. See Assinder, N. (2002) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1965012.stm.

^{xiv}Igham (1991, p.158) suggests 'This [the Lobby] method of communication with journalists is universally practised in government and other circles the world over as a means of opening up the relationship [between government and media]' (quoted in McNair, 1994, p. 135).

^{xv}This model is of course one of the four included in Grunig's (1992, pp.285-326) famous typology. The others are press agency, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical.

^{xvi}For a full list see www.scottish.parliament.uk.

^{xvii}The Westminster constituency of Orkney and Shetland was split into two constituencies.

^{xviii}The results were: Labour (50 seats), Scottish National Party (27 seats), Conservatives (18 seats), Liberal Democrats (17 seats), Greens (7 seats), Scottish Socialist Party (6 seats) and Independents (2 seats).

^{xix}i.e. Prime Minister. Donald Dewar tragically died in office in November 2000.

^{xx}This text is taken from a CSG Report which is available online at the Scottish Parliament website, www.scottish.parliament.uk.

^{xxi}See www.scottish.parliament.uk/welcoming_you. p.5

^{xxii}See www.scottish.parliament.uk/S1/spcb/parlar02-03.htm

^{xxiii} This issue has emerged because there are proposals to cut the number of Westminster constituencies in Scotland to 57 or 58 after the Boundary Commission redraws constituencies for the UK Parliament (probably after the next British general election). The Scottish Devolution Bill contains a clause which would trigger a complimentary reduction in MSP's ,see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/talking_politics/81994.stm

^{xxiv} See www.institute-of-governance.org/onlinepub/iog_129q_submission.html

^{xxv} *ibid*

^{xxvi} *ibid*