

3 Political journalism

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Introduction

Winston Churchill would not go to bed until the first editions of the daily newspapers were delivered to 10 Downing Street in the early hours of the morning. Today few politicians – from the lowly backbencher at Westminster to the holders of high governmental office – can afford to ignore the print and broadcast media. In a moment of stark honesty Tony Blair, as he prepared to leave Downing Street in 2007, admitted that, ‘we paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging, and persuading the media’ (Blair, 2007). Politicians may argue that they have the ability to set the news agenda but, in truth, they have little direct control over how the issues on that agenda are covered by the media. There is, as such, an interdependency in the relationship between politicians and journalists, and in few arenas is still as evident than at the House of Parliament at Westminster.

In an era of almost unlimited access to political and parliamentary information it is worth recalling that reporting of the proceedings at Westminster was subject to legal restriction until 1771. Until near the end of the eighteenth century journalists and printers faced imprisonment for publishing the contents of parliamentary debates while one MP, who published a collection of his own speeches, was actually sent to the Tower as punishment. The relaxation of the secrecy on the reporting of parliamentary debates came after a long campaign for reform and increasing breaches of the publication prohibition. In subsequent decades newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* reproduced lengthy verbatim accounts of parliamentary debates. Charles Dickens remains one of the best-known gallery reporters.

From the mid-1800s onwards the practice of covering parliament changed as a more commercial orientation in the newspaper business saw political stories having to battle for space alongside other news stories. The arrival of broadcasting brought further change during the twentieth century. The BBC’s public service ethos influenced its coverage of parliament and politics first on radio and subsequently on television. Broadcasters worked to rules of impartiality and balance which the partisan print media did not have to consider. A deferential attitude to politicians existed well into the 1950s but this was challenged with the arrival of commercial

television. Radio broadcasts of political leaders were a feature of the airwaves from the 1920s but the television cameras were only allowed into the Houses of Parliament for the first time in 1988. In more recent years, alongside the televising of proceedings, the role of Internet has had a significant impact of how journalists cover the workings of parliament and political life.

In the corridors of power MPs and political correspondents continue to rub shoulder to shoulder but as is discussed in this chapter their interactions in the Lobby and at private briefing sessions increasingly have to adapt to the wider changes in the contemporary media world. Section one of this chapter provides background to the Westminster lobby system and the briefing systems between government and a select group of political journalists. Section two discusses the role of the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman and the changing nature of this position in contemporary political life. Section three outlines the challenges faced by those who work at Westminster and the dangers inherent in close working relationships.

The Lobby and the briefing system

The Parliamentary Press Gallery represents the interests of journalists working in the Houses of Parliament. Membership is restricted to journalists who are formally accredited to work at Westminster as representatives of their specific media outlet. As the number of media organisations covering politics has expanded so too has membership of the Parliament Press Gallery. Today over 300 journalists are accredited to work at Westminster. Within the wider Press Gallery a subsidiary group known as the Lobby represents political correspondents. The Lobby operates as an independent body and has its own committee and rules. It is named after the physical area within the Houses of Parliament where journalists and politicians conduct off-the-record briefings. This system has been in place since the end of the nineteenth century when following an attack on the Houses of Parliament access to the corridors of power was restricted. The Sergeant at Arms at Westminster continues to keep the list of accredited journalists who are issued with coveted identification passes – marked with the letter 'L' in the case of Lobby reporters – which provide access to the parliamentary complex.

This formalised communications system has survived for well over a century although membership of the Lobby has expanded in more recent times while some of its secrecy rules have been lessened. Technology has impacted on the use of the lobby area as mobile phones and email mean it is now possible for journalists to work successfully with far less direct face-to-face contact with their political sources. As one Labour MP explained:

When I first came here [...] it would be rare for that lobby not to include some journalists, and sometimes it could be as many as ten or a dozen or twenty. Now, the only people you see in the lobby are the fellas in the fancy breeches after the place [...] I think it's the advent of 24 hour news.

(See Davis, 2010: 136)

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The modern public relations apparatus emerged in the twentieth century and was first in evidence with the establishment of a press office in the Foreign Office in 1919 (Curran, 2002: 36). Over subsequent decades – but particularly in the 1980s and 1990s – the governmental publicity machine and news management systems expanded significantly, in part, to deal with an expansion of news outlets and the transformation in the nature of news delivery. When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 the government was only really concerned with about a dozen newspapers and a handful of key radio and television programmes. Over the following decade the media sector expanded dramatically – Channel 4 first broadcast in November 1982, Sky News launched in 1989. These new outlets were matched by an increased number of programmes across all channels including, for example, *Newsnight*, which first broadcast in January 1982. Not only was there now more media for political stories but also technological developments in the communications sector meant news delivery became faster and more immediate which in turn placed greater demands on politicians to respond to events.

The exclusive nature of Lobby reporting was emphasised by the right of its members to attend daily private briefings given by government representatives. Throughout the last century the core of the relationship between 10 Downing Street and the Lobby has been this system of twice daily briefings. They were held in private usually off-the-record with attribution to ‘government sources’ or occasionally with agreement to ‘a government spokesman’. The spokesperson was rarely identified by name. The cardinal rule of the Lobby was never to identify an informant without specific permission. The briefings provided the opportunity to ask questions and to tease out issues related to ongoing controversies.

The briefing system was the source of some criticism. First, the ethos of secrecy underpinning the information flow between the two sides created an environment in which rumour rather than fact could drive political news. Second, the exclusion of specialist correspondents undoubtedly assisted the government when their area of expertise was the main news item of the day. Third, the absence of cameras was very much to the advantage of the government representative. Ross made the telling observation that, ‘Spin-doctors are learning that by their body, by the way they emphasise or downplay words and phrases, they can influence how the newspapers report something. You cannot do that when cameras lenses and microphones are fixed on you’ (Ross, 2009).

During the 1980s the Westminster Lobby system was embroiled in controversy when Bernard Ingham the spokesperson for Margaret Thatcher was accused of using private briefings to undermine ministers of the Conservative Party government. The newly established *Independent* opted not to join the Lobby and subsequently the *Guardian* and the *Scotsman* withdrew. All three newspapers returned to the Lobby after election of John Major as Prime Minister in 1992 with a promise to allow previously unattributable lobby briefing to be credited to ‘Downing Street sources’. The election of the New Labour government in 1997 brought further reform. Alastair Campbell ended the 70-year-old Westminster system of secret unattributable briefings for a selective group of journalists. Campbell effectively dismantled the closed shop that was lobby reporting. Some briefings were put

‘on-the-record’ – transcripts with summaries of the daily briefings have been available online since 2000 – while access was granted to specialist and foreign correspondents. Moreover, monthly televised prime ministerial media conferences were held. While Campbell’s approach as Blair’s spokesperson (discussed below) generated controversy one of the impacts of reforms from this period was to increase transparency and accountability – while lessening the importance of the Lobby itself.

The emergence of the Internet – and the use of social media as a political communication resource – has further facilitated more direct engagement between politicians and their supporters and member of the public. While the mainstream media remains vital for communicating with the wider public the Internet has reduced the dependency of politicians and their officials on Lobby members. The Internet has not just opened up new means for politicians to communicate with the wider public – beyond interactions with the Lobby – but has also created new sources of political news beyond the established newspapers and broadcasters. Several political blogs have established high readerships including those written by Iain Dale (www.iaindale.com) and Guido Fawkes (www.order-order.com). These online offerings have also become a form of news competition for the Lobby. The revelation that one of Gordon Browne media advisors was planning to use the Internet to published untrue rumours about Labour Party opponents first emerged in the political blogosphere.

The Prime Minister’s Official Spokesman

There has been a long tradition of Prime Minister’s employing media strategists. Lloyd George relied upon the services of press advisor to influence his relationship with the newspapers during World War I although the increasing importance of media relations was really only clearly signalled with the recruitment of the first chief press secretary in 1930. George Steward was given the title of ‘chief press liaison officer of His Majesty’s government’. Today, his successor in 10 Downing Street has the title, ‘Prime Minister’s Official Spokesman’. The holder of the position has been described as the prime minister’s spokesperson and main media advisor as well as the coordinator of government information. (Seymour Ure, 2003: 125) Media management strategies pursued by the Prime Minister’s media advisor involve attempting to drive the news agenda, create favourable headlines and a positive narrative while destroying a bad one and fire fighting unfavourable stories (Heffernan, 2006: 587).

Bernard Ingham for Margaret Thatcher and Alistair Campbell for Tony Blair remain two of the most dominant press secretaries to have worked at 10 Downing Street. They each had combative relationship with the parliamentary lobby journalists. Contentious queries to Ingham about the business of government were frequently met with the words, ‘bunkum and balderdash’ while Campbell favoured ‘complete crap, C-R-A-P’ or ‘G-A-R-A-G-E’ (see White, 1994: 95). Following his departure from Downing Street Ingham wrote about his twice-daily encounters with the Lobby journalists:

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At 11am members of the Lobby saunter over to No. 10 from their office in the Palace of Westminster for the first briefing of the day in the Chief Press Secretary's Office. My deputy and I sat in extremely comfortable arm chairs on either side of the grand fireplace with a set of tongues on the hearth. My press officers sat with their backs to the windows looking out into Downing Street. The Lobby used the settee and the black plastic chairs stacked against the wall for their convenience. I would tell them what the Prime Minister was doing that day and what Government news events, announcements or publications to expect and then I would place myself at their disposal. They would ask anything they liked and I would answer as I wished. We would each form our own conclusions.

(Ingham, 1994: 557)

Ingham's influence was, in fact, far more substantial than that of a mere provider of information to Lobby correspondents. He was a significant political player in his own right and used his influential position to drive the media agenda of the Thatcher administration. In this regard, the role of spokesman for the Prime Minister – and in effect the senior government spokesman – departed from the traditional civil service neutrality towards politics to being an active participant in the media-political process. Campbell's role was also significantly wider than his job specification. He had an input into policy formation and was one of Blair's closest political advisors. It has been argued that Campbell's 'position at the heart of Whitehall signified the centrality of political communications within the New Labour project' (Heffernan, 2006: 584). The New Labour approach to communications was certainly more proactive than anything witnessed previously. There was far greater central control and coordination with much more emphasis on proactively setting the news agenda coupled with a rapid and robust response unit. From his pivotal position in 10 Downing Street Campbell oversaw this entire communication system and, such was, used his influential reach across all areas of governmental activity. It is little wonder then that one political commentator very early in his term as Blair's spokesperson described him as the 'real deputy prime minister'. (Osborne, 1999: 2)

Campbell was aggressive in his promotion – and protection – of his political master. He had no difficulty displaying contempt for individual journalists. Osborne in an unofficial biography claimed that, 'he dislikes political journalists with an intensity bordering on hatred.' (Osborne, 1999: 7) In the end, however, his zeal for the New Labour cause – and his overwhelming desire to protect Blair – were his undoing. His successors during the remainder of the Labour term in office – under both Blair and Browne – had far less influential and were significantly less controversial. The New Labour communications system came under the spotlight following the Iraq dossier crisis and the Kelly affair. Campbell had, however, been a source of negative comment throughout his period as Blair's media champion with ongoing criticism of an unhealthy attention to style over substance, and also a blurring of the lines between what was the party political interest and what was the business of government. The example of Campbell

in the aftermath of the Iraq dossier controversy – and more recently Andy Coulson in the *News of the World* hacking scandal – illustrates how the media strategist effectively becomes a political liability when they become the story. While Tony Blair may have felt his media strategist was ‘irreplaceable’ once he had become the news story it was a case of ‘he can’t stay on. He’s a marked man’ (See Mandelson, 2010: 363).

Relationships

There is a necessary interdependence underpinning the relationship between journalists and politicians. Journalists need stories while politicians need exposure. The politician can provide the journalist with news while the journalist, in turn, can provide the political with access to the public. The key for political journalists is to develop contacts with elected representative and their advisors. Patience is required as cultivating contacts takes time and these contacts are ultimately built on a sense of mutual trust that is not easily acquired. One of the challenges, however is to ensure that these coordinational relations are not confused with friendship. Journalists have to be able to maintain contacts while, when required, providing the public with critical commentary about government decisions. This type of reportage is not always welcomed by politicians seeking positive headlines for their actions. Balancing the interdependency in the relationship is essential as astutely explained by Jane Patterson, the chief political reporter with Radio New Zealand:

That’s when your professionalism has to kick in and you have to make it clear to those MPs that you’re doing your job as they are doing theirs ... you do have to maintain a bit of distance, otherwise you are not going to be effective.
(Ross, 2010: 275)

Achieving this distance is not always an easy undertaking. One political journalist – Kevin Maguire – has written about the ‘pull’ factor at Westminster which turns reporters into ‘insiders’: ‘Westminster works on nudges, winks and a quiet word here and there ... They pull you in and make you part of the club.’ (See Barnett and Gaber, 2001: 125) Critics of the Lobby system see this close working environment at Westminster as gradually muting political journalism – and that coupled with the secrecy of non-attribution at briefings – places Lobby reporters in a situation of being ‘co-opted as honorary MPs’. (Cockerell *et al.*, 1984: 36) More recently, Bob Franklin from Cardiff University has led the charge about the effectiveness of the Westminster Lobby in holding the government to account amid the dangers of journalists establishing close relations and thereby merely acting as conduits for information. In this view, political and parliamentary journalists have ‘metamorphosed from an active and critical observer of political affairs into a passive purveyor of government messages’ (Franklin, 1994: 87).

The failure of Lobby journalists to expose the MPs’ expenses scandal has been used most recently to illustrate the problems inherent in the media contact system at Westminster. One former chairperson of the Parliamentary Press Gallery said

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the fact that Lobby reporters missed the expenses scandal was ‘an indictment of the lobby system itself’ (Hencke, 2009). Ivor Gaber went further in arguing that the expenses scandal – and the publications of the expenses revelations in the *Daily Telegraph* – will ‘be seen as the moment when the Westminster lobby, if it didn’t actually die, did reach a terminal moment in its continuing slide into irrelevance and decline’ (Gaber, 2010). The calls for reform – and a change in how politics is reported – have come from many quarters. ‘It’s a closed shop. A club. A bizarre Petri dish of rivalry, personal enmity and the occasional fistfight. It need major reform,’ said the former New Labour minister for digital engagement Tom Watson during the height of the expenses scandal crisis in the summer of 2009 (Watson, 2009).

The movement of journalists into the political communication arena has undoubtedly complicated this already complex situation. The number of poachers turned gamekeeper – Campbell and Coulson are prime examples – leads to a myriad of overlapping professional and personal relationships between journalists and politicians. The so-called ‘spin doctor’ is not a recent arrival on the political scene but the sheer number of political PR operators and their professionalism has brought an additional layer of complexity to the nexus between politics and the media in the contemporary era. In this regard, however, former *Guardian* Political Editor Michael White has offered some words of caution:

In a half-functioning democracy you can, as it were, spin some of the media all of the time, all of the media some of the time, but not all of the media all of the time. And the evidence suggests that voters wisely mistrust both sides.

(White, 1994: 104)

The media’s influence may not be as strong as many would like to believe but in framing stories journalists do play a powerful agenda-setting role. Journalists are important participants in the political process in their own right. Their work has an impact upon – and influences – political debate. Critics claim the substance of political information has lessened with an emphasis on framing and interpreting debate over providing facts and explanations. Several studies have pointed increased mistrust and cynicism at the heart of political-media relations not just in the United Kingdom but also in other western democracies (Brants et al., 2010: 36–37). A healthy scepticism towards those in power is an essential component of how political journalists work. But politicians increasingly complain that scepticism has been replaced by cynicism and that the media’s portrayal of politics has enhanced public cynicism and has impacted negatively on the democratic process. In this argument, the media has moved from a socially responsible role in its coverage of politics to approaching politics as a sport and as a form of entertainment. Tony Blair famously spoke about the media acting like ‘a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits. But no-one dares miss out’ (Blair, 2007). The complaints naturally come from both sides. Politicians see a trivialisation of politics. Journalists point to excessive spin.

Conclusion

The MPs' expenses scandal in 2009 reverberated beyond calls for reform of the business of politicians at Westminster. The role of political journalists – and the failure of Lobby reporters to expose such wrongdoing – called into question the institutionalised arrangements under which the media operates at Westminster. The danger of being part of a 'insider club' – underpinned by culture of close relations with politicians and their advisors – is not unique to British politics. Similar concerns have been expressed elsewhere (see Rafter, 2009 and Ross, 2010). This nascent debate about the relevance of lobby reporting, however, has coincided with wider changes in the world of journalism which means that the historical exclusivity of the Parliamentary Press Gallery is vanishing. Political journalism is now practised outside the walls of the Houses of Parliament. Political stories emerge online; they are also pursued by specialist journalists working in the newsrooms of their own media outlets. Yet, notwithstanding the reforms instigated under the Campbell regime the Lobby has itself been slow to respond to these external changes. For example, calls to admit television cameras to lobby briefings have been ignored – in part, perhaps, because opening up the briefing system would at once shatter its mystique and sunder the apparent elite position of the holders of Lobby passes. But for the Lobby – as elsewhere in the media world – standing still is no longer an option. The debate about the role of the Lobby – and the reporting of politics in the UK – is set against a wider debate about the role of the media and its interactions with the political system alongside the fallout from the *News of the World* hacking controversy in 2011.

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