

The untouchables

John Lloyd



The media are at the height of their powers. Nothing – not capital, not labour, not the military, not Christian belief and certainly not politics – commands the same prestige, moral advantage and command over mass attention that the media do. Their themes dominate public and private lives. Their definitions of what is right or wrong, true or false, impose themselves on politics and on the public domain. Their narratives construct the world we don't immediately experience – which, for nearly all of us, is most of the world.

Most notably, they pit themselves against political power and demand the right to judge, denounce, and even prompt, the replacement of political power. Democratic power has the sanction of the vote: but media power has the sanction of audience. The first has been tending to decline, in some cases to alarmingly low levels – below 50 per cent. The second is largely growing, as the media add more and more entertaining products, services and choice for consumers who are increasingly being placed in the position of indulged children: spoilt for choice. Political power in a democracy cannot sustain itself without engagement and debate, on the part of the public as well as of the political classes: and it cannot work without demanding a good deal of citizens, most obviously demanding larger amounts of their money in the form of taxes. The media demand little apart from purchase – at relatively low prices – and attention at an intensity of the viewer's choosing: anything from excitement to snoozing will do.

After Lord Hutton published his report on the death of Dr David Kelly - the government scientist who had committed suicide after having been named as the source for a BBC story, by the defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan, which falsely alleged government mendacity in the creation of a dossier arguing for war on Iraq – British newspapers conducted polls on which institution, government or BBC, retained more public trust. However the question was posed, the BBC always won. That is, the most powerful media institution in the country, which labours ceaselessly and often successfully to entertain its audience, won over government, which had just demanded that the country go to war. Not a matter for much surprise.

Further, the actions and record of the government, and the amount of 'trust' people could put in it, are judged through ... the BBC, and other media. The BBC and other broadcast media did report fully and often fairly on the issues which the Hutton report raised: but that came after years in which the Corporation had led in presenting politics and politicians as debased and careless – with public money, with public safety, with public trust and with the truth. The BBC, wrote Philip Stephens, worked on "the cynical assumption that politicians are born liars and rogues". It was not alone:

indeed, much of that assumption had been drawn from other media, unconstrained by public service duties or assumptions – media which held that 'the only definition of truth to be whatever has appeared on that day's front pages or the news bulletins'.

Journalism in Britain – in Britain above all other democratic states – has been beguiled by a series of assumptions and attitudes, which created the 'accident waiting to happen' which was Andrew Gilligan's 06.07, May 29 2003 broadcast. The accident was waiting to happen because the media had become predators, destructive of their environment. Their environment is the institutions, practices and traditions of the democratic state: their rights and privileges derive from these; their power would be nothing without them. Indeed, they would have no power, but would be reduced to the slave media which we know from authoritarian states, where political power drives out all others. Or rather, it uses the form of independence while making the content its own – as authoritarian states make the media an extension of their rulers' power.

Or again, as we can see from the contrast with contemporary Italy, a democratic state, they become so heavily politicised and so leached of independent news judgement that no-one can tell how far the media are giving an account of the truth, or are being prevented from doing so, or are reacting in fury to a false charge with false, or overdrawn, charges of their own. Media create an environment of understanding: if it doesn't have a large space for rational discussion, careful reporting, and wide contextualisation, then we are left with the trading of charges, insults and opinions. These are necessary, or at any rate inevitable, in a democracy: but they don't get at the truth in themselves.

In the last two decades, the understanding that media depend on democratic institutions which work well has been lost or never gained: the public sphere has not been seen as one to preserve, but as an area on which tournaments may be staged on the one hand, and as a landscape dotted with forests, in whose depths reporters could hunt for prey, dragging them out into the light of day on the end of their spears.

The news media have rarely been, and certainly are not now, separable from other forms of media and other forms of power – an observation which is true of the media everywhere. They have always been suborned to political purposes; have always operated part in, part outside of, the world of entertainment; have always expressed, directly or indirectly, the interests of their owners. Part of their drama has always been a striving for independence from the powers that own or control or seek to master them. This drama is the one most constantly celebrated by the media and their most powerful actors: the drama of men and women striving to be free to tell the truth. In this drama, the villains are (in a muted and often private way) the owners, more often officials and above all, politicians.

The struggle between politicians and the media is at the core of the news media's practice. This is because the struggle, which has been usually represented as a healthy clash of independent institutions in a democratic policy, has for some time – in the UK - assumed the character of a zero-sum-game struggle for power. It is part of the aim here to show that this is not at all healthy: because it diminishes, rather than aerates or increases, freedom: and it increases the anomie and distrust within civil society. This is an argument intensely disliked by the media, for it strikes at the heart both of their idealistic self-belief and their everyday practices. But it should be made, and should be made from within the media themselves: indeed, it is almost the only place from which it *can* be made.

First, the struggle between politics and the media is generally supposed, certainly by the media, to be unequal: in the end, politics can always trump the media because it has the power – state power – to do so. Politicians can pass laws restricting the media. They can refuse to give access to journalists, limit what they are told and see and even arrest them. But in practice, this does not happen: it cannot happen, while liberal democracies remain what they are (if, of course, they cease to remain so, then all bets are off: including, and perhaps more seriously, for liberal politicians of the Right and Left). In liberal democratic practice, the struggle is unequal the other way round. Politics and politicians depend on the media for access to people. If the media do not allow that access, then politicians have few other ways of making known their priorities, programmes and proposals. The public meeting and walkabout continue to be part of a campaign: but for the leaders and principle personalities of parties, the campaigns are made for the media. This is, of course, a political 'choice': and politicians have been extraordinarily accommodating to the media – so much so, that the media

can with justice point to politicians as collaborating with them in producing a new kind of media-friendly politician, who has in turn become an object of media scorn. But the fact that politicians collaborate in the degradation of politics is not an argument for degradation.

Second, the access to the media which is granted to politicians is on increasingly harsh terms. Access to the citizenry – what the media call the audience – is mediated by an assumption on the media's part of bad faith on the politicians' part. This is made explicit in most of the press: implicit, in the main, in the broadcast media. Many of the major presenters of TV current affairs see politicians as a debased class: occasionally they betray their beliefs by making them explicit. Since they are the most powerful, prominent and most highly rewarded of their profession, editorial control over them is light and emulation of them by reporters and presenters further down the hierarchy is encouraged. These presenters and reporters are the smartest, sharpest and most appealing in their profession: how could they fail to be taken as role models, and to be believed – in a world where role models are increasingly created, rather than being lodged in the traditions of institutions or the sanctity of religions? The answer is that they do not fail: they are believed: and one of the results is a spread of publicly sanctioned cynicism of the business of politics.

Third, the media interpret freedom as an unrestricted right to reveal, interpret and describe as they see fit. To aid this interpretation, the controllers of the media – owners, and editors – have either weakened their control, or have adopted the agenda of writers/reporters/producers. The common drive is to expose: owners rarely, and most editors even more rarely, act as agents of social responsibility – that is, putting the case that this story or that broadcast would be damaging to society, or to an individual. Increasingly, such a case would attract ridicule – from all sides, especially if it was made about the government. To the contemporary British newsroom, the objections credited to Ben Bradlee during the unfolding case against President Richard Nixon which became known as Watergate – that here was a story which impugned the highest officials in the land and thus had to be treated with the greatest of care – do not, generally, operate. What does operate is what Katharine Graham, President of the Washington Post company, in her memoir, warned against – that of succumbing to 'the romantic tendency (for the press) to picture itself in the role of a heroic and beleaguered champion, defending all virtues against overwhelming odds'.

Fourth, a shift in the language of journalism has occurred in the past two decades. It has adopted some of the tropes of radical pamphleteering, or the more polemical intellectuals. It is increasingly concerned to prove a case, generally of scandal, official incompetence or looming crisis without describing conflicting pressures or constrained contexts or admitting to a balance of judgements. Modern journalism is accusatory in tone even when it is not directly so in meaning: it has assumed the right to permanent and suspicious overseership of public – and too frequently, of private – life, and the concomitant right to issue the harshest of interpretations of how that life is conducted. Naturally, it assumes no responsibility for what it reports on – even when it is reasonable to assume that its reporting has materially changed the environment on which it reports.

Fifth, and consequently, the media have an unwritten rule not to divulge their power. They are critically important players in public life: account for huge amounts of leisure time; give news round the clock on each day of the year; stage the dramas and spectacles which provide the content for much of the common interests of acquaintances and friends; teach attitudes; introduce trends; show how to display emotions. They have gone from being enfolded in, or even marginalised by, the more powerful institutions of the state and the set patterns of communal and private life, to enfolding them. They have made the world their oyster: or rather, they *are* the oyster, em-pearling their audience with their glow of ceaseless interest, ceaseless novelty, ceaseless sensation. The media make and re-make the world – and yet when the news media represent the world, they largely excuse themselves from it. Contemporary life is inexplicable without an account of the part the media play in it: yet media studies are put in a specialist area of the academy, a sub-branch of sociology or social anthropology, and kept there. Politicians who question the power of the media are dismissed as shifting the blame from their own mistakes: politicians who court the media are caricatured as lackeys, as if they had no overpowering incentive to seek to ensure that their message would travel, relatively undamaged, down some channels.

Sixth, the habit of comment has become general. In part this is because the number of columnists has increased many-fold. The late Hugo Young, in the introduction to a collection of his columns published after his death in September 2003, wrote that in the 1950s, there were no political


columnists: but in the early 2000s, Young had encountered an acquaintance who had been asked by the Prime Minister's office to compile a list 'of all national newspaper columnists to whom Downing Street might want to get a political message across. His survey wasn't yet complete but so far he had counted no fewer than 221 of them'. The comment demonstrates the evident fact that comment is now the habit of our age: it also points to the concomitant trend, which is that the line between the fact and the comment is now gone. The reporter and the presenter is much freer to suggest, or even impose, his or her own explicit or implicit judgement on the process described than at any time since the broadcast media became dominant.

Seventh, this – and other countless such displays – are evidence of a knowledge of power. Politics dominated the media until sometime around the 1960s: the time when hard questioning in interviews, investigative reporting and TV satire of politics began. Since then, politics and politicians have been – often literally – on the defensive, constantly ceding ground to the media in what the latter can ask and how they can ask it, what they can and should know and in their willingness to take part in the harsh or derisive representations of the political process which the media stage under the name of current affairs. There are many trumps for civil society here: many of these are in the opening of previously needlessly secret places. But the story is not all one of triumph – even if media people celebrate the end of politics' supremacy over them as the advent of 'real' journalism, especially in broadcast news and current affairs. They see the vast shift as a time when we passed from a journalism whose reporters asked questions of the kind - 'have you anything you wish to say to us, Prime Minister' to the reported injunction of Harry Evans, editor of the Sunday Times from 1967 to 1981 – 'always ask yourself, when you interview a politician – why is this bastard lying to me?' It was indeed the advent of a questioning, revealing and stone-turning approach to news: but it inevitably carried another side. In adopting the tropes of investigation, journalists made themselves the arbiters of public life and public persons, and claimed to be the main guardians of truth and morality. Bit by bit, those who had been elected to do some of that job – parliamentarians – found themselves losing the power they had to be the first and cardinal arena for examining, debating and concluding what action should be taken in public life. Journalists have, in the main, celebrated this loss of political power and mocked politicians' efforts to retain it. Now, however, the loss has become chronic: and the media's part in it remains obscured – since the media admit to having no effects except benign ones.

This *is* a struggle for power. Media strive to have power over the same people and for the same reasons as do politicians – the main reason why, having been liberated from any inhibitions or injunctions which would make us subservient to the political sphere, we denigrate them so much. We need people to follow us – that is, buy our papers or watch or listen to our programmes: more, we need them to believe our stories, our versions of the world – or if not believe them (for people would go mad if they tried to seriously believe, and thus act on, all or even some of the stories spun to them every day by the industrious media) then at least be diverted enough by them to form a habit of buying or switching on, day after day, filling more and more hours with the fantasies we weave for them. Politicians also tell stories – they tell stories in order to be elected: and once elected, they tell stories about the nature of the challenges, and the kind of measures and reforms necessary to meet these challenges. These stories can be more or less close to reality, but at least reality follows them: that is, they can be judged by reference to real consequences, and further real consequences follow in terms of votes. Our stories do not have serious consequences – except to provoke more stories.

This essay is based on the introduction to 'What the media do to our politics', by John Lloyd, published by Constable Robinson, June 2004.

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