# FROM PRESS TO PARTIES AND COVERAGE TO CANDIDATES

**This week Politics and Media join forces to look at all the issues that are affected by both. We address the issues of ownership, portrayal and international coverage**

By **Heather Casey**
Media Editor

**Media and politics, a relationship like *gair rhydd* and its readers. The majority of time it delivers interesting relevant information, but occasionally so many in-jokes and personal references that you get lost.**

Most obvious collusions between media and politics are party political broadcasts, political publications (From *Private Eye* to the *Spectator*) and a specific area of communications labelled as 'spin'.

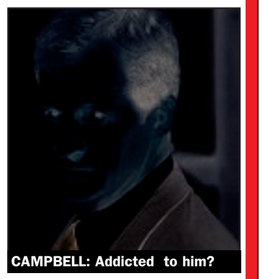
> **'Cherry picking' and 'get out clauses' mean constructing news has never been so easy**

Blurring the boundary between PR and politics, 'spin' has become the controversial tool of the decade, mostly associated with one man – Mr Alistair Campbell.

The former Labour Director of Communications and Strategy, is reported to have said: "The media are obsessed with portraying spin doctors as a bad thing, yet seem addicted to our medicine." Strategies such as 'cherry picking' and 'get out clauses' mean that constructing news has never been so easy.

The relationship between institution and press can be tricky, but most scrutiny from the press can be justified. Government press officers especially, anyone for the Jo Moore email on September 11 2001? Tastefully commenting: "It's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury."

Politics and Media will never be straightforward; this double page spread has combined writers to shed some light on the reasons *gair rhydd* think why. The following articles discuss the issues of media ownership, representation of political leaders in press and how politics is treated internationally.



CAMPBELL: Addicted to him?

# Paper-thin allegiances

By **Andrew Mickel**
& **Lucie Apampa**

**A newspaper's allegiance is seen as a holy grail to political parties. To many it's seen as a way to have a substantial chunk of the electorate delivered straight to your door come election day, and a guaranteed section of support on most issues for most of the time.**

Of course, unless you're the editor of the *Morning Star*, things aren't quite so clear-cut. Newspapers are fickle things; one day you have half the print nation cheering on your education policies, the next they'll be chastising you for snorting cocaine off a prostitute's arse. Besides, there's nothing to guarantee that readers will pay any attention to what they read anyway.

To most, Rupert Murdoch embodies the capitalist, power-centric world that we inhabit; to many, he is the devil himself. But to some, like Tony Blair, he is a beacon of light – a man with the power to sway a nation's political allegiance with the influence of his vast media empire, which, in Britain, includes the *Sun*, the *Times* and BSKYB.

The *Sun*, the UK's highest selling paper, arguably defines, rather than reflects, the political tastes of its audience. And the man behind these definitive choices is none other than former Thatcher's darling, Rupert Murdoch who, undoubtedly enticed by Blair's courting of him, has supported Labour since 1997. For despite being notoriously right-wing, Murdoch enjoys the company of the powerful and has a knack for gaining their allegiance before that power is fully won.

But with Blair on his way out and Murdoch claiming political 'neutrality', it looks like the Tories might be in luck this time around.

Of course, what a newspaper baron says will not necessarily translate through into what its readers believe. The *Daily Express* was, until the late nineties, a Conservative stronghold. But in the period it supported Labour from the late nineties until 2004, it is unlikely that many of its readers' votes turned red. As a paper that caters for the middle-classes, the biggest concerns which are expressed every week in the paper's contents and readers' interests are Conservative strongholds of house prices and - in the short term, at least – immigration. The owner Richard Desmond's claim in 2003, when the paper still supported Labour, that "I have always been a socialist" would have convinced few.

As a renowned opportunist, his extraordinary performance at a meeting with *Daily Telegraph* management in the same week that the *Express* turned Tory – where he started goose stepping and singing the German national anthem in front of the German team – rings far truer for a paper that only last week carried stories about how the 'Diana fund pays out to gypsies and asylum seekers'.

Still, considering the paper's management itself seems to now admit that the fast-dwindling readership that stays with it is for the covermounted CDs and DVDs, their support means little to anyone anymore anyway.

Some say that the 'Murdoch style' of newspaper ownership is on its way out, and instead the Barclay brothers' style is on the way in.

The Barclay brothers bought the Telegraph Group from notorious press baron Conrad Black last year, and despite no drastic changes to its main content, have been commended for running approaches that differ greatly to those of the interfering Black.

Now facing charges of criminal fraud, Black was renowned for his traditionalist approach at ownership – an approach that saw him unashamedly use his paper as a political instrument to support those (the Tories) he wanted to see in power. The Barclay brothers, on the other hand, live abroad and have left the running of the Telegraph Group in the hands of chief executive Murdoch MacLennan. Still, even without having the owners interfering in day-to-day editorial content, they are instead shuffling around who makes the paper – and therefore who defines the paper's editorial line.

Ultimately, newspapers can only have a limited effect on what people decide to think. Political parties can still court them to try and harden their support – but ultimately their importance is dwindling. In time, their impact on political decision-making may do so too.

PRINT DADDIES: Rupert Murdoch and Richard Desmond

By **Andrew Mickel**
Political Editor

**Andrew Marr does it, Jonathan Dimbleby does it. Even educated Andrew Neil does it. There's certainly plenty of political coverage to pick up from across the media, but there's one glaringly obvious problem with it (and hands down at the back, it's NOT that it's dull). Everything is devastatingly Westminster-centric.**

From the sketch writers in newspapers to the intense over-scrutiny of the Westminster village on television, no-one else gets a look-in. Arguably, television producers have started to notice there's something going wrong, but their solution has consistently been to try and get the word from the 'people on the street' rather than listen to the other crucial institutions that matter.

Try watching a news report – especially an ITV 'News' shoestring special – and see how many times they'll rely on vox pops, or give out text and phone numbers as a vain attempt to make a connection with the viewer. After all, having a producer and an e-mail inbox is far more cost effective than worrying about having coherent journalistic structures at a local level.

TELEVISION: Go West(minster)

So what is being left out by never leaving the Westminster bubble? Regional politics are ignored, but as Welsh politics is going to be relevant to only the tiniest sliver of the readership of, say, the *Guardian*, it might as well stay an issue for the regional press.

> **Thanks to the intense over-scrutiny of the Westminster village, no-one else gets a look in**

More importantly there is the stunning ignorance on behalf of most of the populace on any issues European. Although Brussels admittedly seems to take every step possible to ostracise itself from the real world, the media doesn't give anywhere near enough time to the issues considering their massive importance.

The BBC has recently decided to increase its European coverage and has put the heavyweight name of Mark Mardell behind the project, instead of the normal no-name wonks it sends off to Belgium. Still, that's a luxury that the Corporation has afforded to it thanks to its size; any other news organisation has to watch its money much more carefully.

For the meantime it looks like the cheaper option of having a Westminster correspondent reporting the slightest political gossip as news, instead of a recognition of the growing complexity of politics, is going to win out every time.

# All Abroad the Politics train

By **Nadia Bonjour, Andrew Rennison & Aline Ungewiss**

**In recent years, the relationship between media and politics has come under increasing scrutiny. With controversies such as the Iraq dossier in Britain and the farcical US election of 2000, it is interesting to explore how the two sides co-exist in other countries.**

In Germany, attacks on politicians are often blamed on the media. The endless negative reporting of political figures invites people to openly show their discontent. In 1990, Wolfgang Schäuble was shot and paralysed during a speech by a man of political opposition. The German media explicitly voice their opinion of politics, criticising as well as praising.

However, invading a politician's private sphere had always been a journalistic taboo in Germany. By an unspoken agreement, the media would not publish incriminating information about politicians, even if it were common knowledge amongst journalists.

In recent years, the relationship has changed. In the 2002 election campaign, where the Chancellor's wife played an important role, attracting much media attention.

Politicians realise the media's power, therefore there is a certain degree of cooperation in order to ensure positive propaganda. This relationship tends to weaken during election time, as the media are seen as key to determining who wins. Recently, some of Germany's biggest newspapers have protested against the increased censorship by politicians in interviews, denouncing the trait of 'control mania'. This reflects how politicians still have a certain power over the media and are able to protect themselves from negative publicity.

In Russia, citizens had until quite recently experienced strict media censorship coupled with substantial propaganda through television and the press. The choice for newspaper readers has blossomed since the fall of communism, though journalistic independence is still in doubt. Newspaper ownership was dominated by the 'oligarchs', who controlled numerous titles. However, their influence is now fading, allowing the state to exert greater control.

In the last decade, the Kremlin has also acquired more power over Russian TV networks, as well as the safety and independence of journalists themselves, critics claim that this increase in government influence has suppressed independent broadcasting. By taking to court two of Russia's biggest tycoons, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, the Kremlin forcibly attained control of NTV in 2001, and then ordered the closure of TV-6 a year later. The channel TVS replaced TV-6, and continued as Russia's only private national network until it too was shutdown in 2003.

The small country of Switzerland makes for an interesting case study. With seven million inhabitants, Switzerland counts four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansch. This linguistic multiplicity makes it difficult for the media to access the whole population in one given language. Principle television broadcasting in Switzerland is produced by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG-SSR), which accounts for seven channels; three in German, two French and two Italian. There are no other terrestrial commercial companies and therefore SRG-SSR's main competition comes from cable and satellite programming.

Newspapers are owned by multimedia companies forcing small-scale publications either out of the market or into being bought out. There are four national daily newspapers however, these are all in German and therefore only really accessible to German-speakers.

> **Many countries have changed their Media-Politics bond,often for the worse**

The Swiss print media tends to remain fairly 'neutral', a term often associated with Switzerland, and news is typically reported objectively without any overt attitudes or allegiances. Media does not always have and exert the same power over the general public. The Swiss media does have a degree of social influence, but nothing quite comparable to Britain and the US. The media's chosen opinions are generally selected independently based on importance and interest, rather than being governed by politics.

It appears difficult to find examples such as Switzerland where the word 'neutrality' can be used regarding either side. What is clear is that many countries have experienced changes to the media-political bond in the last decade, often for the worse.

*DER BILT*: Politics German-style

# PERSONALITIES IN POLITICS

By **Claire King**
& **Josie Bunting**

**The media adores scandal. It snaps it up like a pack of sharks would polish off an over-zealous holiday-maker who foolishly drifted out to sea on a plastic lilo. So when politicians behave badly, it is sun-dried man, marinated in sea for the scandal-loving media.**

So when the Clinton – Lewinsky affair occurred, journalists began to salivate. So much attention was given to the affair, that a CNN poll on media coverage showed that 72 percent of Americans believed that there had been 'too much' coverage of the scandal. While newspapers were filled with the ins-and-outs of evidence and the trial, congress happily continued with its day-to-day business of law-making pretty much unnoticed.

During an election the media can be the only way we find out about politicians. And that's why the way they are treated by the media is so important. As we only hear about politicians through the media, it can have a major influence on our voting. In this year's general election the *Sun* told the world that the "*Sun* smoke goes red for Blair". The biggest selling newspaper in the UK supports the Prime Minister, so does its coverage. However, their treatment of other leading politicians is not so kind; Charles Kennedy is 'bungling' and 'unprincipled and unworthy of your vote', while the paper warns of 'loony' Lib Dem policies.

The Communication Research Centre at Loughborough University studied coverage of the last general election. They found it was a more 'presidentialised' campaign, where the focus is on individual politicians and not the party. This means politicians need the right image to appeal to voters.

Focus on individuals, however, means greater examination of female politicians. Margaret Thatcher's 'iron lady' image meant she was a masculine character. For female politicians, their gender is always on display, and their age and appearance always commented on, a prime example is Minister of education, Ruth Kelly. Women are scrutinised by the media because by taking up a position of authority, they are seen as stepping outside the boundaries of 'normal' female behaviour.

This treatment by the media works both ways, as men must also behave in a gender specific fashion. Bill Clinton did not play any sport and dodged the draft, so found feminine pictures of him were printed.

CLINTON : Not an alpha male

Professor Judy Polumbaum, of the University of Iowa, notes the 'pressure cooker' in which journalists can become trapped: "After all people read what you give them."

> **Journalists should exercise caution in the shameless exhibition of personal political opinion.**

Journalists are expected to both set the agenda and adhere it, which certainly makes for some rather cyclical morning reading. Currently David Blunkett is particularly news-worthy. After his affair last year with the married Kimberly Quinn, his attempts to fast-track a visa for her nanny and this year's revelation: he has had to resign from government a second time, as he held on shares in DNA Biosciences when he returned to government, but failed first to get approval from a committee for his outside interest.

In spite of the obvious hurdles Blunkett has had to overcome to achieve a rise to power, the media has had no hesitation in devouring him in two bite-size morsels. Evidently the media has enormous influence on our political opinions and understanding. Journalists should exercise caution in the shameless exhibition of personal political opinion. With that in mind my final point is – down with Bush! Down with Bush!