

Politics and the

Mass Media

in Britain

second edition

RALPH NEGRINE

This fully-updated new edition of *Politics and the Mass Media* provides a comprehensive introduction to the role of mass communications in politics at all levels, from election campaigns, news reports and lobbying groups to the media activities of pressure groups.

The relationship between politics, politicians and the media is a matter of increasingly contentious public debate, as politicians' awareness of the importance of the media becomes more sophisticated amidst rapidly-advancing media technology and control.

Providing a review of the nature and content of political communications and of recent theoretical developments, Negrine addresses the issues surrounding today's mass media, including cable and satellite television, investigation of the press, the relationship between the state and broadcasting institutions, and the ever-present question of whether or not Britain needs a media policy. This new edition includes:

- Case studies and examples from television and the press
- Fully-revised text with updated sections on the press, broadcasting and media legislation
- Brand new chapters on Europe and globalisation

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Cover design: Slaney Hart Associates

Media & communications studies/Journalism

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

11 New Fetter Lane London EC4P 4EE
29 West 35th Street New York NY 10001
Printed in Great Britain www.routledge.com

ISBN 0-415-09468-2



9 780415 094689

POLITICS AND THE MASS MEDIA IN BRITAIN

Second edition

Ralph Negrine

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1989
by Routledge

Second edition published 1994
by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Reprinted 1994, 1996, 2000

Transferred to Digital Printing 2003

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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Typeset by Florencetype Ltd, Kewstoke, Avon

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

TJI Digital, Padstow, Cornwall

Printed on acid free paper

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Negrine, Ralph M.

Politics and the mass media in Britain/Ralph Negrine. - 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Mass media—Political aspects—Great Britain. 2. Great

Britain—Politics and government—1979— I. Title.

P95.82.G7N44 1993

302.23'0941—dc20.

93-19010

ISBN 0-415-09468-2

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book examines the political role of the mass media in contemporary Britain. It covers the main features of the press and television in Britain and, with extensive use of examples, develops an analysis of their relationships with 'politics' and political and social institutions, and the implications of those relationships.

The definition of politics adopted throughout this book is a broad one, namely, that 'politics creates and conditions all aspects of our lives and it is at the core of the development of problems in society and the collective modes of their resolution.'¹ The reason for adopting such a broad definition is that politics and political discourse infuse all aspects of our lives and the mass media play a key role in this process of political communication. Thus, the study of the mass media and elections sits alongside the study of pressure groups' use of the modern means of mass communication.

Although the book deals with a broad definition of politics, it adopts a more restricted register of mass media. The two most often cited sources of information about the world – television and the press – take pride of place in this book. And within those two media, attention is mainly focused on those aspects of the media which are overtly political – either in content or in their implications. Thus, for example, television news and current affairs feature prominently while light entertainment does not; similarly, more attention is paid to 'political' stories in the press than to stories which highlight the sexual peccadilloes of television superstars.

The decision to focus on these areas should not be taken as a dismissal of the other output, nor of their classification as 'non-political'. In their own, and very important ways, the entertainment format, the James Bond film, and the representations of the life and loves of Samantha Fox, are steeped in political implications. Our concern, however, is with the processes, relationships, and structures of political (mass) communication. This orientation towards the more traditionally defined 'political' content of the mass media also explains the absence of any discussion of women's magazines, pop music radio stations or popular films. Again, it is not the absence of 'political' implications that has ruled them out but the specific perspective

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

adopted here as well as the author's limited resources and time. The emphasis is, as Seymour-Ure has recently reminded us, on the means of communication that are 'for' politics.²

There are other omissions which the careful reader will note. There is no discussion of the laws which restrict the media in one way or another. The D Notice System, the Official Secrets Act, the law of contempt, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and matters of libel are all absent from the following pages. There are two major reasons for the decision not to cover them. First, they are well and extensively documented elsewhere and a discussion here would not further our knowledge of them or of their operation. Second, when grouped together they illustrate a fairly simple but vitally important fact about the nature and extent of secrecy in Britain, namely, that the mass media operate within a structure of government that is highly secretive, that is extremely protective of its interests, and that will do its utmost to retain control of information which it deems to be of national interest. Such is the everyday context of the mass media in Britain.

In this last decade the power of government and the force of the law have brought even greater pressure to bear on the enterprising journalist. The roll-call is frighteningly lengthy: Peter Snow during the Falklands campaign; *Real Lives: At the Edge of the Union*; Kate Adie over the reporting of the American bombing of Libya; Duncan Campbell over the Zircon Spy satellite programme, and the BBC Radio Four programme *My Country Right or Wrong* on the Secret Service. The fallout from Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* memoirs has affected the press in a way previously unimaginable and there is no sign that the Government is intent on giving up its fight to muzzle the press.

But it is not only the journalist who has suffered from the effects of a secretive and powerful centralized state machine. Individuals interested in protecting civil liberties and natural justice have also suffered. The two cases which rocked the 1980s testify to this: Sarah Tisdall was imprisoned for leaking documents, though the jury cleared Clive Ponting.

These incidents are separated by many things – different contexts, actors, situations – but they have one thing in common, and that is that they symbolize the lack of freedom of information which Britain enjoys. It is in this atmosphere that day-to-day journalism operates and whilst not all journalists are touched by these incidents they are bound to have a damaging effect on morale and investigative fervour.

If the journalistic backdrop is one of secrecy and legalistic oppression, the journalistic 'stage' comprises a politically committed newspaper industry which does not allow for a range of views to be aired fairly. These two factors, by themselves, restrict the ability of the 'honest, enterprising and responsible' journalist – if he/she exists – to do his or her work adequately for the purposes of informing the community. Whether there can be a reform of the system so as to make such a role more realistic is touched upon throughout

the book. It is not explored specifically and in detail because the experiences of past debates on the subject have never got beyond the academics' pages. More important for the future are those philosophies of liberalism and deregulation which appear to be having such an enormous impact on this (Thatcher) Government's thinking about the restructuring of the means of mass communications. These are explored in great detail.

The book, therefore, covers a variety of related ideas, practices, and organizations. Although some of the chapters can stand on their own, others benefit from being seen in the broader context which is set out in the first two chapters. The first chapter, *Politics and the Mass Media*, is a review of current thinking about the place of mass communication in politics as well as an assessment of the media's political 'impact'. It also establishes a number of propositions which are explored in later chapters. For example, the relationship between political actors and the mass media which is set out in this chapter is examined in greater detail in the study of pressure groups and the mass media (Chapter 8).

Chapter 2 focuses on contemporary 'theories of the mass media'. After a brief historical review of the development of such theories, this chapter raises questions about the adequacy of these theories in the present day. The position adopted here is that such theories have failed to take into account the extent of social, political, and economic change which has overtaken the world and which has had an enormous impact on historically derived, and sometimes preserved, theories of the mass media. It explores both the reasons for the inadequacy of these theories and some proposals for reform. This chapter also includes a discussion of the neo-liberal philosophy with its calls for a deregulation or liberalization of the airwaves and the institutionalization of a form of 'electronic publishing'.

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on the British press. The first of these two chapters examines the political history of the press, whilst the second concentrates on the economic development of the medium. Clearly, the separation is, to some extent, for purposes of clarification of the argument, and there is considerable overlap between the two chapters. For an understanding of today's press one needs to read both chapters.

Just as two chapters are devoted to the press, two are devoted to broadcasting. Chapter 5 gives a broad analysis of British broadcasting and of its development within a particular socio-political milieu. Chapter 6 develops the argument further with specific reference to the more political aspects and relationships of the broadcasting organizations. This chapter includes not only case studies but also a review of the pressures and problems of the Independent Television sector *vis-à-vis* political broadcasting.

Chapter 7 focuses on the study of news. It considers the importance of news values as they affect the content of the mass media before turning to the context of news production. This chapter also explores the question of television 'bias' by referring, albeit somewhat briefly, to two studies: the

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Glasgow University Media Group's *Bad News* and the more recent study of *The Television Coverage of the Miners' Strike*. The last section of Chapter 7 looks at contemporary examples of news management by focusing on a study of lobby correspondents.

Chapter 8 takes issue with a number of propositions set out in Chapter 1. It looks at the ways in which pressure groups make increasing use of the mass media. It considers not only why they attempt to make use of the mass media but also whether this has any effect on the policy-making process. The pressure group examined here is CLEAR (Campaign for Lead-Free Air).

Chapter 9 reviews the literature on the role of the mass media in general elections. It combines a number of different aspects of this enormous area: the 'impact' of the mass media on voting behaviour, the study of broadcasting practices, the organization of party political and election broadcasts, newspaper practices, the content of electoral coverage in both the press and broadcasting. Extensive use is made of data from recent elections, including the 1987 election.

Chapter 10 focuses on the future. It includes a discussion of the 'new media' of cable and satellite television, and attempts to give a coherent and comprehensive account of these new media as well as of the legislative and regulatory framework within which they are being rapidly developed. The focus of this chapter is the direction of future change as well as the implications of that change for existing broadcasting organizations. Instead of setting out remedies, *it asks whether it is possible to set out remedies*. Drawing on recent interest in the question of 'media policy' or 'media policies' it concludes that all such policies are fundamentally about the sorts of societies which we desire and, following on from that, the sorts of means of mass communications which service those societies. In this respect they are neither rational nor value-free, but political.

The book is intended for the general reader even though it is, at times, very detailed. The area of mass communications is an ever-expanding one and this book only touches the surface. The careful and keen reader is therefore recommended to turn to the many books referred to here. These will not only broaden the reader's knowledge but also highlight the continuous debates and differences of political perspectives that populate the field.

The author and publishers are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce figures: Audit Bureau of Circulations, as reported by P. Clark in *Campaign*, 16 October 1981 (Figs 4.1 and 4.2, p. 59); and Mirror Group Newspapers Ltd, 1, 10 and 11 June 1987 (Figs 9.1–9.3, pp. 174–6). All other sources, where applicable, appear below the figure/table or in the Notes at the end of the book.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since this book was first written there have been many changes. Some, like the changes which have been imposed on the independent television structure, are only now just being felt; others, like the debate about the future of the BBC, are only just beginning. But there have been many other events which have necessitated altering some of the contents of the book. These are too numerous to mention in this Preface and they vary from the small detail – such as the changes in the lobby system – to more major ones, such as the coming into existence of the Independent Television Commission (ITC).

In putting together the second edition I have kept the main framework of the book as it was originally conceived but every effort has been made to signal those changes which need to be examined and understood. In other words, I have tinkered with the text to bring it up to date; in the process I hope I have incorporated the major changes which have taken place in the last five years.

The result of this work will be more evident in some chapters than in others. Thus, the early chapters on theories of the mass media have been brought up to date to include recent debates but these changes have not been substantial. This also applies to the historical overview of the press. The most noticeable changes are to be found in the chapter on British broadcasting (Chapter 5), in the chapter on political communication (Chapter 9), and in the chapter on the 'new media' (Chapter 10). In each case there are sound reasons for this: a changed broadcasting environment in the wake of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, a general election in 1992, and some fairly radical changes in the nature and organization of the new media.

One new chapter has been added to the book in order to introduce some current issues. Chapter 11 discusses the work of the European Commission in the field of television, as well as the theme of 'internationalization' which is hotly debated nowadays. Both these areas have an impact on broadcasting in Britain, and on the future of the BBC – a point taken up in a short Postscript.

CONTENTS

<i>Preface to the first edition</i>	vi
<i>Preface to the second edition</i>	x
1 POLITICS AND THE MASS MEDIA	1
2 THEORIES OF THE MEDIA	20
3 THE BRITISH PRESS	39
4 THE BRITISH PRESS: OWNERSHIP, CONTROL, ADVERTISING, AND RESTRUCTURING	57
5 BROADCASTING IN BRITAIN	81
6 THE POLITICS OF BROADCASTING: 'LIBERTY ON PAROLE'	100
7 NEWS AND THE PRODUCTION OF NEWS	118
8 'M IS FOR MEDIA': THE POLITICS OF MEDIA PRESSURE	139
9 POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: THE MASS MEDIA AND GENERAL ELECTIONS	152
10 THE 'NEW MEDIA': CABLE TELEVISION, SATELLITE BROADCASTING, AND THE FUTURE OF BRITISH BROADCASTING	179
11 DO WE NEED A NATIONAL MEDIA POLICY?	202
POSTSCRIPT: THE FUTURE OF THE BBC	212
<i>Notes</i>	215
<i>Index</i>	232

POLITICS AND THE MASS MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

Empirical research has long confirmed that for most people the mass media are the major sources of information about world events (Table 1.1) and about political affairs (Table 1.2).

Table 1.1 Sources of most world news¹

	1980 %	1983 %	1985 %
Television	52	60	62
Radio	14	10	14
Newspapers	33	28	23
Magazines	0	0	0
Talking to People	1	1	1

However, despite television's growing importance as a source of information, regular readers of newspapers continue to attach a great deal of weight to the print medium (Table 1.2(b)). Non-readers show a greater dependence on television for political information.

Both tables conceal significant variations in responses between readers of 'quality' and 'tabloid' newspapers (Table 1.3)²: the former remain wedded to their preferred medium, using it much more extensively as a means of surveying the world in depth, whilst readers of tabloid newspapers rely more heavily on television and also tend to attach greater credibility to it as a source of news (Table 1.4).³

These tables confirm the centrality of the media for the public. They are the means by which the public acquires information about the world and, more importantly, through which the public derives its knowledge and perceptions of current political and social problems and of the means to their resolution.

The approach to the study of 'politics and the mass media' adopted here

POLITICS AND THE MASS MEDIA

Table 1.2 Voters' major sources of political information⁴

	(a) % citing source:		(b) % citing sources in top 2 media sources amongst:	
	as most important	in top 2 sources	readers	non-readers
TV	63	88	88	85
Newspapers	29	73	80	35
Radio	4	14	11	29

is inevitably much broader than that usually found within political science. Traditionally, the study of politics and its relationship to the mass media has focused on institutions and bona fide political actors. Governments, politicians, departments or voting patterns have usually been the political scientists' fodder. When married to an interest in the mass media, the result has been an over-concentration on institutions, structures, and the political élite. While this remains of importance, this sort of approach overlooks the part the mass media play in generating public perceptions of political and social change as well as of policies and decision-making processes. The political significance of the mass media goes far beyond such questions as 'who controls the media?' and 'how do people get elected?'; even concerns over 'bias' and 'objectivity' are too narrow to take in the full significance of the mass media. Politics and the political infuse all aspects of our lives, our attitudes, and our behaviour. And because the mass media are at the heart of the processes of communication through which 'problems' and their 'resolution' are framed and discussed, they deserve extensive analysis.⁵

THE NATURE OF 'MEDIATED' KNOWLEDGE

This broad approach to the political significance of the mass media is reflected in many contemporary writings. These emphasize the media's role in providing information – both images and texts – which forms the basis of public perceptions and responses to events. The media provide, in Blumler's words, 'the informational building blocks to structure views of the world . . .

Table 1.3 Regular readers of:

	<i>Telegraph, Times, Guardian or FT</i>	<i>Express or Mail</i>	<i>Mirror, Sun, or Star</i>
<i>Main source of news</i>	%	%	%
television	32	62	65
newspapers	57	28	24
radio	25	14	14

POLITICS AND THE MASS MEDIA

Table 1.4 Regular readers of:

	<i>Telegraph, Times, Guardian or FT</i>	<i>Express or Mail</i>	<i>Mirror, Sun or Star</i>
<i>Most believable</i>			
<i>source of news</i>	%	%	%
television	30	59	66
newspapers	35	13	11
radio	20	16	13

from which may stem a range of actions'.⁶ Although these 'informational building blocks' combine with a multiplicity of political and social factors to direct an individual's action, they determine the limits of our knowledge and of our perceptions of events and their causes.

The growing interest in exploring the 'stored information about . . . objects held by individuals'⁷ – sometimes referred to as cognitions – marks a shift away from the view of the media as of great importance in the formation of individual and specific attitudes or opinions. An individual may not acquire a specific attitude – on how to vote, about race or trade unions – from the mass media, but he/she will derive information from the media which will contribute something to each of these individual areas.

It is therefore conceptually useful to distinguish between what the mass media tell us to think about – this is signalled by the events they cover – and what specific attitudes or opinions we have to adopt towards those events, though clearly these distinctions may be difficult to uphold in practice. A television or press report of an event, for example, will consist of a selection of information and that particular selection will inevitably inform as well as contribute towards, rather than directly form, specific attitudes.

This distinction between cognitions (the informational building blocks, the stored bits of information) and specific attitudes or opinions is critical, for it not only emphasizes the public's growing dependence on the mass media for information but it also draws our attention to the consequences of such a dependence. Because only a small handful of events can ever be experienced by individuals at first hand, we inevitably rely on the mass media to inform us about events beyond our immediate grasp. But the mass media select which events to cover and they take decisions about how those events will be presented; therefore they not only inform us about (a small selection of) events but their presentation of those events will also consist of their explanations and interpretations of those events. To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, ' . . . men [and women!] live in second-hand worlds. . . . The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings.'⁸ As the influence of other agencies of socialization and knowledge transmission such as the Church, schools, and political parties declines, the mass media become even

more central in the creation of the 'images in our heads of the world outside'.⁹

What sort of information do the mass media select and how is that information presented? Analyses of 'news values' suggest that the information chosen is not simply a random selection of events. There is a clear pattern; a pattern which indicates a hierarchy of seemingly important events and individuals. Elite groups, nations, and individuals as well as large-scale, dramatic events dominate the news (see Chapter 7). Thus, the news values and news judgements which determine the content of the media not only direct our thinking to specific areas which the media define as 'important' but, conversely, direct our thinking away from other 'unimportant' areas. In this way they contribute to our mental maps of the world. In the realms of politics 'they define – and also define away – opposition.'¹⁰

News values and considerations of newsworthiness also prioritize events and they describe, establish, and reinforce images and relationships of order and power in our society. The prominence accorded to certain political actors, institutions, and practices is not simply an outcome of judgements of what is, or is not, somehow intrinsically important. News judgements contain within them an implicit understanding of the nature of our society, where power lies and how it is or should be exercised. For example, 'the very notion of "élite persons" – a key category of newsworthiness – has, according to Hall, "the "routine knowledge of social structures" inscribed within it'. In order to communicate, the mass media must 'infer what is already known, as a present or abstract structure . . . but [this structure] is a construction and interpretation about the world'.¹¹ It is not a mere reflection of it; the media do not simply report the world for us in any 'neutral' or 'objective' sense, they interpret the world for us.

Furthermore, the items selected will usually have rich meanings within specific cultural contexts. So within specific cultural contexts, the mass media are able to employ existing cultural referents because, like coins of exchange, they are comprehended by all. In this way, there is a reciprocity between the mass media and society/culture. They draw upon past and present political/social and cultural referents but, at the same time, they also contribute to these. This allows for cultural continuity as well as for cultural change.

A good illustration of this is the way in which today's images and meanings of the monarchy have been successfully layered onto the more popular and spectacular historic traditions – so ignoring less popular and controversial republican ones – and, at the same time, given a contemporary appearance. Members of the Royal Family have long been aware that to remain in the public conscience requires coming to terms with, and feeding, the needs of the media. The Royal Family has thus judiciously assented to this and so has participated in the creation of its own image; in the process, it has ensured that the monarchy, as an institution and as a symbol, retains

a cultural past, present, and (crucially) future. It goes without saying that both sets of institutions have benefited enormously from this symbiosis: the former from its continued popularity and support and the latter from a continuous stream of royal copy which appears to ensure increased sales. By 1992, as the Royal Family is confronted with internal marital problems, the relationship between the media and the Royals has become somewhat strained, though fundamentally unchanged.

The media also perceive some institutions as more 'important' and hence more 'newsworthy' than others and they perpetuate that perception by locating themselves within or near those institutions. Political institutions, the judiciary, and the police, for example, are considered 'newsworthy' and become natural sources of information for the mass media. Consequently there is a 'bias towards authority'¹² ever present in media work.

The very presence of the media also tends to alter the relationships between the political and social institutions which they link up. The mass media form a web of communications across institutions and their existence and practices have an impact on those institutions and their relationships to each other. The mass media have become an integral part of a complex network of institutions and they contribute, and give meaning, to the relationships between institutions and groups in the political system.

This is true in at least two senses. In the first place, the mass media are 'so deeply embedded in the [political] system that without them political activity in its contemporary forms could hardly carry on at all'.¹³ Few contemporary political strategies are conceived without considerable attention being paid to media considerations. This is particularly so during election campaigns, though one can easily cite numerous other and different examples (see Chapter 8).

Beyond this accessible and easily comprehensible illustration of the 'impact' of the mass media and the extent to which political activity is a by-product of the existence of the mass media, there is another, more elusive, but just as significant aspect to the media's role in contemporary society: the nature of political practice and the contours of the political system are, to an extent, derived from the work of the mass media. To quote Gitlin at some length,

the texture of political life has changed since broadcasting became a central feature of American life. The very ubiquity of the mass media removes media as a whole system from the scope of positivist social analysis; for how may we 'measure' the 'impact' of a social force which is omnipresent within social life and which has a great deal to do with constituting it?¹⁴

The contours of the political system cannot be seen as something external to the mass media, something on which they have an 'impact', since they play a part in its determination by, for instance, giving meanings to events, by

setting the agenda for debate, and by shaping the political climate. The recent coverage of environmental issues illustrates this point.

By giving substantial coverage to environmental issues, the mass media call attention to them. Publicity forces policy-makers to respond. Those lobbying on behalf of the environment may also gain a legitimate place within the policy-making process and the character of their organization may change as a consequence. All these changes fall well within the observation that 'political activity in its contemporary form' owes a great deal to the existence and practices of the mass media.

Media activity gives shape to the ill-defined contours of the political system: it brings new players and issues into the political arena, it leaves others out, and it rearranges positions and placings. Such activity goes beyond the granting or withdrawing of legitimacy. In a real way, the mass media give political systems their contemporary form and operational concepts within the political system their contemporary flavour.

But the mass media do not single-handedly give shape to the contours of the political system. Much recent research has focused on the degrees of co-operation and collusion between the mass media and those with the power to impress their own definitions of the world onto the practices of news organizations. This would suggest that the study of politics and the mass media needs to take account of the relationships between the media and those in positions of power; it also needs to focus on specific and recognizable instances of 'impact' and 'effects' as well as the deeper level of perceptions of politics and of the political system.

THE MEDIA, THEIR 'POLITICAL IMPACT', AND 'THE QUESTION OF "REALITY" '

Although it is plainly easier to examine the narrower conception of the media's political impact by exploring specific case studies, long-term and fundamental changes in the public's perceptions of the political world must not be overlooked. These two dimensions of the media's political influence can be illustrated by briefly comparing two contrasting, albeit complementary, approaches to the study of the role of the mass media within the political system.

(1) Political 'impact' as changed relationships: the work of Colin Seymour-Ure

Seymour-Ure's detailed study of the part the mass media have played in British politics contains a considered summary, and clarification, of the concepts of 'effect' and 'impact'. Though he often poses specific questions when exploring individual case studies, he nevertheless adopts a fairly wide-ranging conception of 'effects' since his orientation is towards such broad

questions as ‘effect of what kind upon whom or what?’¹⁵ and ‘How far and in what ways are the political relationships and individuals affected by the communication between them?’¹⁶

In adopting this approach, Seymour-Ure avoids the idea of the mass media having a universal and unitary effect on all members of the audience. The ‘impact’ of the mass media will, according to his analysis, differ depending on the context of the communication and the actors concerned. He also distances himself from approaches to the study of media ‘impact’ which conceive of them in a fairly narrow way. Instead of using the Lasswellian framework for the study of the media’s effect on, say, individual voting preferences – namely, what is ‘the effect of the media on the election’ – Seymour-Ure suggests that one should rephrase the question as follows: ‘What is the function of media in the electoral process?’ This would avoid the ‘*assumption that the effect of the media is limited to the potency of their messages*’.¹⁷

The suggestion that the media can have a multiplicity of ‘effects’ on a variety of different actors is developed fully in his examination of the meaning, and nature, of media ‘effects’. ‘At its broadest’, he writes, ‘“effect” is defined . . . as any change within the political system induced directly or indirectly by the mass media.’¹⁸ These can vary in intensity: the media may be the cause of something or, at the other extreme, merely a catalyst. In essence, though, ‘all political effects are initially upon individuals. They consist in increments of information, which may or may not modify attitudes which may or may not modify behaviour.’¹⁹ At the most basic level, an ‘effect’ would consist of an individual’s changed ‘relationship with at least one other individual’.²⁰

Such effects could take place at a number of different levels within the political system: an individual’s relationship to another could change as a result of the media just as an individual’s relationship to an institution could change as an outcome of media work, and so on. Seymour-Ure sets out five such possible levels or ‘changed relationships’, with appropriate examples:

- political system/individual e.g. Enoch Powell’s 1968 ‘rivers of blood’ speech had an enormous ‘impact’ on British politics;
- political system/institution e.g. the entrenchment of the monarchy;
- institution/institution e.g. the relative strengths of the political parties;
- institution/individual e.g. resignations of individual politicians;
- individual/individual e.g. the televised Kennedy/Nixon debates in the early 1960s worked to the former’s advantage.²¹

An interest in ‘the relationships that the media affect’ means, in effect, that one can legitimately explore an enormous field of activity; no field is precluded since the media are omnipresent. The areas that the political scientist will explore will, however, most likely depend on the sorts of ‘effects’ and relationships they are interested in.