NEWS AND JOURNALISM IN THE UK

Fourth Edition

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TO THE MUGWUMP, FOR MAKING IT

PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

The decade which has passed since the publication of the first and fourth editions of this book has been one of huge change for British journalism. When the first edition appeared in 1994 there was no on-line journalism and only one UK-based rolling news channel. Flagship television programmes such as *News At Ten* on ITV, and the *9 O'Clock News* on BBC One were seemingly immovable journalistic objects, fixed forever in their slots as symbols of British public service broadcasting's commitment to quality news at peak time. Likewise, the high-profile presence of *Panorama* on BBC One and *World In Action* on ITV, reflected long-standing obligations on the part of both public-funded and commercial broadcasters to produce quality current affairs programming at times in the schedule when people might actually watch it.

The press, meanwhile, fifteen years after the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, were overwhelmingly pro-Conservative in their editorial bias, and widely criticised for their propagandistic, anti-democratic contributions to British political life. The worst offender in this regard, Rupert Murdoch, was routinely at loggerheads with the public-service BBC, viewing the corporation as an unfairly subsidised obstacle to his commercial ambitions in the UK. His rolling news service, SkyNews, remained in 1994 something of an upstart in the journalistic universe, even although it was the only UK-based service of its kind.

How things have changed. Now, the BBC and ITN have joined Sky in the rolling news business, which has expanded with the proliferation of cable and satellite channels on British television. Counting CNN and Bloomberg, the UK TV viewer with the appropriate receiving equipment now has access to five 24-hour news services, as well as a channel (BBC Parliament) devoted entirely to coverage of parliaments in the UK and Europe.

More than that, after decades of open warfare between the two organisations, the BBC under Greg Dyke has joined with Murdoch's BskyB in taking over the digital terrestrial TV licence held until 2002 by ITV. Having survived the long years of Conservative government, its confident collaboration with Murdoch signalled that the BBC had by 2003 moved into a position of unquestioned dominance of British broadcasting, and the provision of broadcast journalism in particular. ITN, on the other hand, the only serious rival to the BBC on five channels of terrestrial TV, was in a state of on-going crisis, seeing its income and resources whittled away by the need to compete with such as Sky for the ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 news contracts. ITN had also been seriously damaged by battles around scheduling, which in 2000 saw *News At Ten* cancelled then, after much protest and prevarification, brought back, but only on three days a week. As ITV dithered over the scheduling of its peak time news bulletins, *News At Ten* became *News at When?* Viewers abandoned ITV in droves, and for the first time in many years ratings for BBC One's news bulletins overtook those of the commercial channel.

For the British press, change was less obviously dramatic, but still significant. From an overwhelmingly pro-Tory editorial bias in the general election of 1992, the press had become just as overwhelmingly pro-Labour, aggressively backing Tony Blair in both the 1997 and 2001 elections. Even Rupert Murdoch, the scourge of Labour before Blair's emergence as leader, had learned to love (or at least tolerate) the Left (or the version of it espoused by New Labour). Press ownership had also changed, with major new players like Ireland's Tony O'Reilly (the *Independent*) and Richard Desmond's Northern & Shell emerging (the *Express* titles) to take on the established interests.

Through it all, debates about the quality of British journalism have occupied audiences, academics and journalists alike. 'Dumbing down', 'tabloidisation', 'Americanisation', 'commercialisation' – all have been brandished as accusations at the producers of British journalism, in both the broadcast and print sectors. Commercial pressures have been blamed for an alleged marginalisation of what its advocates tend to call 'serious' current affairs and documentary. Outrage at the excesses of some news organisations – such as the *News of the World*'s 'naming and shaming' campaign against alleged paedophiles – has continued to erupt, if not quite with the regularity of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Kelvin Mackenzie and other tabloid editors placed the British system of

press self-regulation at serious risk with their intrusive coverage of the Hillsborough disaster and other stories.

But the legitimate criticism of those sub-sectors of British journalism which deserve it should not be allowed to obscure an interesting and welcome fact: that the story of news and journalism in the UK since 1994 is one of remarkable growth. The emergence of on-line journalism may well turn out to be the most significant aspect of this trend, though it remains as yet peripheral to the provision of news through established press and broadcast platforms. When the first edition of this book was researched and published, there was no such thing as news on the Internet. Today, no self-respecting journalistic organisation is without its on-line portal, supplying an estimated global market, in mid-2002, of about 600 million net surfers. Many journalistic sites are independent of the established news providers, offering information alternatives to the mainstream. Others, such as FT.com, are developing new ways of packaging journalism for a world in which geographical and cultural borders are breaking down.

And then there is the dramatic expansion of rolling news, bringing with it the creation of a global news audience for events such as the September 11 al-Quaida attacks, as well as the hugely expanded availability of broadcast journalism all day, every day, for those who want it. Although still, by 2002, reaching only a fraction of the audience for news programmes on the free-to-air terrestrial channels, there is no doubt that in the multi-channel, digitalised, globalised future, rolling news will be a key sub-sector of the British media market.

Alongside the globalisation of journalism which 24-hour channels have delivered, regional and local news has expanded in the UK, especially in the print sector. A point made in the first edition of this book is even more obvious a decade later – cultural globalisation does not reduce the need for local media; on the contrary, it increases that need, and the robust health of regional publishers in the UK proves that fact.

Audiences for radio have increased too, and have been doing so throughout the lifetime of this book. Despite the explosion of television news and on-line services, people still want to listen to radio, for news as well as entertainment. There are many more radio channels operating today, servicing larger audiences, than there were twenty or ten years ago.

And the national press, though declining in its total circulation over the decade or so since 1992, remains in the main popular and

profitable, given that the range of journalistic alternatives to the humble newspaper or magazine has increased to include even the mobile phone. Thus far at least, the expansion of broadcast and on-line news media has not meant the death of print, and there is no evidence that such an eventuality is likely in the foreseeable future.

This edition incorporates all of these trends, and to that extent paints a picture of the state of news and journalism in the UK which is rather more positive and optimistic than some would accept. Many justified criticisms of the British news media are discussed and acknowledged in the following chapters, such as the precarious state of current affairs on peak-time television, and continuing deficiencies in the sphere of press regulation. But there can be no doubt that, contrary to the cultural pessimism which has characterised academic debate on the subject for decades, the production of British news and journalism is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, remarkably healthy and robust. Indeed, we inhabit an exponentially expanding public sphere of news, analysis and commentary, disseminating far more information than any one individual could possibly absorb. The key issue is not, as many feared it would become at the height of Thatcherism, how to ensure the survival of quality journalism in the UK, well-resourced and politically balanced, against the brutal logic of the free market; it is how to justify the vast quantities of journalistic output now produced across print, broadcast and on-line media, both public and commercially funded, at local, national and international level, given the finite capacity of the audience to consume it. How long, for example, can the British media market support three UK-based rolling news services, none of them reaching more than a minuscule fraction of the TV audience?

As well as providing an up-to-date snapshot of how the British news media looked in the first decade of the twenty-first century, this book aims to address these and other issues in an accessible, thought-provoking way. Whether the reader agrees with all my conclusions or not, I trust that he or she will find it a useful map through the expanding, rapidly changing network of organisations and individuals which make up the British news media.

For this edition, the contents of each chapter are outlined in bullet points, and most chapters end with suggestions for further reading. Readers will also find a guide to further reading in the notes and bibliographical references.

Brian McNair
February 2003

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Part I

THE VIEW FROM THE ACADEMY

1

WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

This chapter contains:

- An outline of the organisational structure of the British news media, including details of ownership, newspaper circulation, and broadcast ratings
- An introduction to the key academic perspectives on British journalism.

In the twenty-first century the production of news, and journalism of all kinds, is big business. The supply of information (whether as journalism or as rawer forms of data) occupies an industry of major economic importance, employing huge human and financial resources, and enjoying high status. Across the world, top newsreaders, anchor men and women, and newspaper columnists acquire the glamour of movie stars and exert the influence of politicians. Broadcasting companies judge themselves, and are judged, by the perceived quality of their news services.

Journalism is also an expanding business. At the beginning of the 1980s there were just two organisations supplying televised news and current affairs to the United Kingdom: the British Broadcasting Corporation and Independent Television News. Each provided around two hours of news per day. Now, there are three UK-based providers of television journalism accessible to the British audience (BBC, ITN, Sky), transmitting on five terrestrial channels, and a host of satellite and cable channels. The number of hours of television news available to the dedicated viewer has increased exponentially as 24-hour services have come on air, and the established terrestrial producers have augmented their services

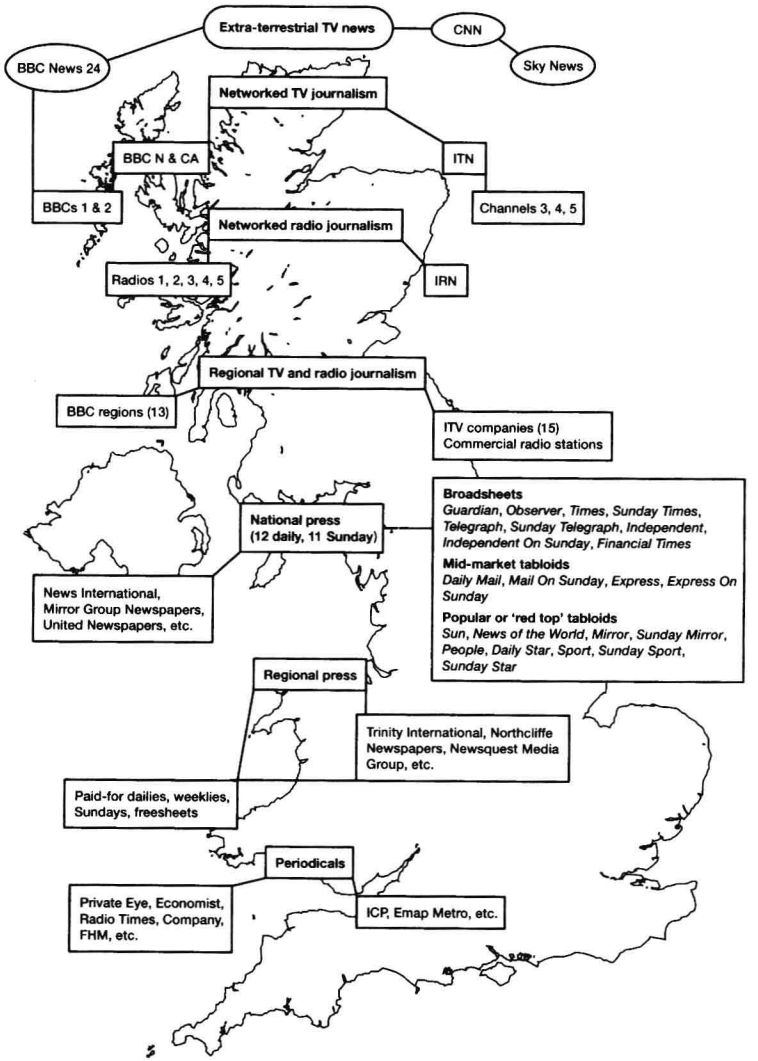

Figure 1 A news map of the United Kingdom.

with breakfast news, round-the-clock bulletins and coverage of Parliament.

Radio journalism is also expanding as more national and local channels are set up. There are, if one counts such upstarts as the *Sport*, *Sunday Sport* and *Sunday Star*, more national newspapers than there were twenty years ago. At local level a large 'freesheet' sector exists alongside the 'paid-fors'.

This chapter examines current thinking on how these proliferating journalistic media might affect individuals and social processes. Most of us assume that journalism matters: but does it really, and if so, in what ways? We begin, however, with a description of the British journalism industry: the types and structures of organisations which provide us with journalistic information; who owns them; the extent of their reach and the size of their audiences. In this way, and as a prelude to discussion of why journalism matters sociologically, we can draw a 'news map' of the UK (see Figure 1), beginning with the most popular and pervasive medium, television.

Television

The earliest provider of television journalism in the UK, the British Broadcasting Corporation, began life in 1922 as the Broadcasting Company. Originally a cartel of radio manufacturers, the Broadcasting Company was financed by a licence fee, and by a share of the royalties on the sale of radio receivers. The Broadcasting Company was nationalised and became the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1926, from which time it was licensed to serve as 'a cultural, moral and educative force for the improvement of knowledge, taste and manners' (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, p. 8).

Operating under the provisions of a Royal Charter, the BBC was constituted as a 'public service', funded by public taxation. It will continue to play this role for the foreseeable future, subject to periodic charter renewal.

From the outset the BBC interpreted its public service role to mean that it should be a major provider of information to the British people, devoting a large proportion of its resources to news and current affairs broadcasting, first on radio, and then on two channels of television. In 1990–1 BBC One devoted 1,164 hours to news and current affairs, and 992 to the broader category of 'current affairs, features, and documentaries'. For BBC Two the figures were 268 and 1,384 hours respectively. The Directorate of

News and Current Affairs – the department responsible for BBC journalism – had a budget in 1991 of £130 million (about 24 per cent of total TV costs).[1] In 2002, BBC journalism had an annual budget of more than £300 million. The News and Current Affairs directorate employed 2,500 staff, who produced some 55,000 hours of journalism across the range of TV and radio channels.

Until 1955 the BBC had a monopoly on British television news. That year a commercial network was launched, producing its own news and current affairs. The independent television (ITV) companies shared out the making of current affairs and documentary programmes, while their news was provided by Independent Television News (ITN). ITN was to be owned collectively by all the ITV companies, and run on a non-profit-making basis to supply them with news bulletins. This it did very successfully, winning the contract to provide Channel 4 with news when it came on the air in 1981. By 1988 ITN employed more than a thousand people to produce over twenty-five hours of news per week (Dunnett, 1990, p. 132). In 1997, ITN won the £6 million contract to produce news for the new Channel 5. In 2001, despite vigorous competition from Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB, it won the contract to continue producing news for the ITV network, and in 2002 its long-standing Channel 4 news contract was renewed, at a value of £20 million per annum for five years.

Regional TV news

The bulk of the BBC's news and current affairs, and all of ITN's, is produced in London and networked throughout the UK. But both the BBC and ITV also provide regional news services. Since the merger of Yorkshire TV and Tyne Tees TV in 1992 there are fifteen ITV companies covering the country, each with its own locally produced magazines, news bulletins and current affairs output.

The BBC has six 'Nations and Regions' (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and North, Midland and South in England) and thirteen regional departments (such as BBC London, BBC South East) producing television news and current affairs at local level.

Breakfast TV

Breakfast television services were established in Britain in 1985, reflecting the trend throughout the 1980s towards more hours of news programming on television. The BBC was the first to provide