

# **An Introduction to Political Communication**

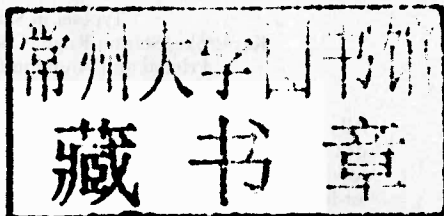
Fifth Edition

**Brian McNair**

# AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Fifth edition

*Brian McNair*



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# AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

## Fifth edition

*An Introduction to Political Communication* introduces students to the complex relationship between politics, the media and democracy in the United Kingdom, United States and other contemporary societies. Brian McNair examines how politicians, trade unions, pressure groups, NGOs and terrorist organisations make use of the media.

Individual chapters look at political media and their effects, the work of political advertising, marketing and public relations, and the communicative practices of organizations at all levels, from grass-root campaigning through to governments and international bodies.

This fifth edition has been revised and updated to include:

- the 2008 US presidential election, and the first two years of Barack Obama's term
- the MPs' expenses scandal in Britain, and the 2010 UK election campaign
- the growing role of bloggers and online pundits such as Guido Fawkes in the political agenda-setting process
- the emergence of social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and their destabilising impact on the management of political crises all over the world, including the Iranian pro-reform protests of July 2009 and the Israeli attack on the anti-blockade flotilla of May 2010
- the growing power of Wikileaks and other online information sources to challenge state control of classified information

Brian McNair is Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. He has authored many books and articles on political media, including *News and Journalism in the UK* (fifth edition, 2009), *Mediated Access* (2003), *Journalism and Democracy* (2000) and *The Sociology of Journalism* (1998).

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The significant revolution of modern times is not industrial or economic or political, but the revolution taking place in the art of creating consent among the governed . . . Within the life of the new generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government. None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political premise.

(Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*)

## FOR RAYMOND AND JANINE

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In his seminal study of *Public Opinion* Walter Lippmann observed that the practice of democracy had ‘turned a corner’ (1954, p. 248). The democratic process, it seemed to him four years after the end of the First World War had, to an extent unprecedented in human history, come to incorporate self-conscious strategies of *persuasion* by political actors. The gradual extension since the early nineteenth century of voting rights to wider and wider sections of the population, combined with the emergence of media of mass communication, had fundamentally transformed the nature of the political process, for better or worse. No longer could it be assumed that political action derived from the collectively arrived at will of rational, enlightened men (for men they exclusively were, of course) of property and education. Henceforth, the masses would decide, through their exercise of the vote and the influence of *public opinion* on the political process.

But public opinion, Lippmann recognised even in 1922, was a constructed, manufactured thing, which could be shaped and manipulated by those with an interest in doing so. To that end, he noted the rise of a new professional class of ‘publicists’, or ‘press agents’, standing between political organisations and media institutions, whose job it was to influence press coverage of their clients, and thus, they hoped, public opinion.

In the twenty-first century these trends have accelerated and deepened, until not only ‘the practice of democracy’ but politics in all its forms is played out before a mass, sometimes global audience, through an expanded network of print, broadcast and online media which have made McLuhan’s metaphor of the planet as a shrinking ‘global village’ into a truism. As the role of the media in mediating between politicians and public has increased, so has the importance of those publicists, press agents and others in what we may refer to as the political public relations industry. Brave (and probably doomed to failure) is the organisation which ventures into the contemporary political arena without a more or less sophisticated understanding of how the media work and the professional public relations machinery capable of putting that knowledge to good use. For all political actors, from presidents and prime ministers to trade union leaders and terrorists, this is now recognised to be a

major prerequisite of successful intervention in public debate and governmental decision-making.

If these trends are generally acknowledged to be real, they have not been greeted with unanimous approval outside the offices of the political public relations agencies themselves. For many, the growing centrality of the media in the political process degrades the latter, undermining its democratic characteristics and transforming it into meaningless, empty spectacle. Others point with distaste to the use of the media by avowedly undemocratic organisations, such as al-Qauida, to influence public opinion in directions favourable to their political objectives. More optimistic voices welcome the media's heightened political role as signalling a long overdue extension of democratic participation. Others still resign themselves and their organisations to the reality of an age when politics and the media are intimately and forever bound together. Rather than complaining about the increasing 'mediatisation' of the political process, these groups strive to get in on the act.

This book is intended as both an introduction and a modest contribution to that debate, which has become so prominent an element of contemporary political discourse throughout the advanced capitalist world. It will be of value, I hope, to the growing numbers of students, researchers, teachers, and concerned citizens with an interest, professional or otherwise, in the relationship between communication and politics.

My own interest in the subject derives from many years of research and teaching in the field of media studies, in the course of which it has become abundantly clear that what the media do is as much the product of external factors – in the particular context of this book, the activities of the political communications industry – as with such intra-media considerations as journalistic bias, proprietorial interference, or the routine practices of news-gathering. In previous work I have examined the relationship between the political public relations activities of, for example, the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the British Labour Party, and the Soviet Government (McNair, 1988, 1989, 1991) and the media coverage received by them. These discussions were marginal, however, in the context of work concerned chiefly with how journalists thought and behaved. This study of political communication concentrates to a much greater extent on the nature of the interface between politicians and the media, the extent of their interaction, and the dialectic of their relationship. It probes the limits on the actions of politicians on the one hand and journalists on the other, and the influence of both on what citizens think and do.

Such an emphasis owes much to those who, over the last three decades, have developed what has become known in communication studies as the *source-centred* approach (Goldenberg, 1984; Tiffen, 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). The term focuses attention on the active role in shaping media content played by those who provide the source material, rather than the

producers of journalistic output themselves. The shift is one of emphasis, and this book does not seek to replace the notion of an all-powerful media with that of the all-powerful 'spin doctor' or media manipulator. It will, however, add to a growing literature in communication and political studies concerned with locating the media's agency and effectivity in a wider social – in this case political – environment, characterised by greater levels of uncertainty, risk and arbitrariness than some perspectives within communication studies have acknowledged.

Structurally, the book is organised into two parts. In Part I, I examine what is meant by the term 'political communication', and who precisely are the communicators. I describe the normative principles of liberal democracy and consider how political communication relates, in theory, to the democratic process. A complete chapter is devoted to outlining the contexts in which modern mass media communicate politically, and another to the 'effects' of political communication on behaviour, attitudes and social processes.

Part II places this introductory and theoretical material in the context of the political communication practices of a variety of actors, including governments and party politicians, both domestically and in the international arena; business and trade union leaders; and marginalised political actors such as pressure groups and terrorist organisations.

A short conclusion makes a tentative effort to answer the question: is the increasing role of mass communication in the political process a 'good' or a 'bad' thing for democracy?

## PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

The first edition of *An Introduction to Political Communication* appeared just late enough in 1995 to be able to make reference to the emergence in British politics of a young, fresh-faced Tony Blair. Blair was a new kind of left politician, leading a new kind of left political party. A New Labour, indeed, which under his leadership went on to win an unprecedented (for Labour) three general election victories and hold power in Britain for thirteen years. With the publication of this, fifth edition, Tony was gone, and so were New Labour, replaced by the first UK coalition government since the Second World War.

Testament to his influence is the fact that Conservative Party leader David Cameron, prior to becoming prime minister in May 2010, was marketed as the ‘real successor’ to Tony Blair, mainly because of his desire to ‘decontaminate’ the Conservative ‘brand’ and reach out to an aspirational, de-ideologised British public for which old class politics were increasingly irrelevant. Just as Blair embraced elements of Thatcher-era Conservatism that appalled some in his party, Cameron acknowledged the achievement of Tony Blair by attempting to emulate much of his policy substance and style.

New Labour revolutionised political communication in the UK, and in the democratic world more widely. The party’s thirteen years in government provided us with the concept of ‘spin’ and now widely used phrases such as ‘on message’ and ‘Mandelsonian’. By the time of the publication of this edition, the key architects of New Labour had all produced their own accounts of events and their part in them – Communication Director Alistair Campbell in his diaries (2008, 2010); Peter Mandelson in *The Third Man* (2010), and Blair himself in *A Journey* (2010). I draw on the first two of these here (Blair’s book did not appear in print until after the revised typescript had been completed), as well as recent scholarly and journalistic literature on political communication, including work by Eric Louw, Aeron Davis, Nick Davies and Brants and Voltmer.

In addition to the departure from the UK political stage of New Labour, the timing of this fifth edition allows me to incorporate a number of significant developments in the political cultures not just of Britain, but liberal

democratic societies in general. Most important of these is the full flowering of the internet as a political communication tool for all self-respecting political actors, in or out of government.

When the first edition of this book was published in 1995 the internet was not a meaningful part of the political communication environment. By the fourth edition in 2007 online technology had evolved and disseminated sufficiently to play a significant role in the 2004 US presidential election. In most other democratic countries the campaigning and networking properties of online media were still relatively undeveloped, but political actors were learning quickly.

Political journalists, too, were increasingly visible online as bloggers. My fourth edition referred to what a 2005 *Guardian* feature article described as a 'new commentariat' of political bloggers, who were said to be supplanting the print pundits who had hitherto dominated political commentary in most democratic societies.

By 2010 the use of the internet, and social networking tools in particular, had become standard communication practice for political actors. In the United States online campaigning and fundraising were widely seen as key in Barack Obama's successful presidential run in 2008. The British government and its myriad agencies such as media regulator Ofcom used Twitter extensively to communicate internally, with one official producing a much-read manual on how to use the social networking platform.

By 2010 Twitter and Facebook were also being routinely used to communicate with electorates and stakeholders. The internet was by then also used to publish detailed and exhaustive official information on events such as public inquiries and judicial reviews. The passing of Freedom of Information legislation under New Labour encouraged this trend in the UK, but there was a global movement towards openness and transparency in government. A dwindling number of authoritarian regimes resisted, of course, and not all democratic governments were good at learning the rules of information management in the globalised, digitised environment of 2010. It was a reality no government or state apparatus could ignore, however.

Increasingly, this openness was imposed on governments whether they liked it or not, as in the activities of the Wikileaks site, which published classified US military and other documents to the world without permission, and often despite the objection and acute embarrassment of official sources. When Israeli soldiers killed nine people in their determination to stop the 'peace flotilla' of May 2010, footage of the incident was relayed through Twitter and other platforms to publics all over the world. Social networking tools were used extensively in the pro-reform post-election demonstrations in Iran in June 2009.

As Wikileaks and the capacity of Twitter to bypass governmental censorship has demonstrated with increasing frequency in recent times, the new online communication tools are proving to be of value not just to politicians



in government, or campaigning towards that goal, but to their publics and those who might oppose their policies. Apart from using the internet to make available information which would otherwise have remained secret or hidden, members of the online public were able to comment on and manipulate political messages. They could watch ads and campaign messages on YouTube and Twitter, but also subvert and ‘mash’ them using widely accessible editing tools. The capacity for loss of control of political messages – for *communication chaos*, as I have described it elsewhere (McNair 2006) – has been enhanced beyond anything seen in the pre-internet era.

Another advantage of the internet, for readers of a book such as this in particular, is that the US campaign spots cited in the chapter on advertising, for example, or the live leader’s debates which featured in the 2010 UK election, can now be viewed after the fact and at leisure on YouTube, BBC iPlayer, Sky News and other sites. This author was trapped in Boulder, Colorado by the disruption caused by the Icelandic volcano in April 2010, and thus missed key media moments in the UK general election campaign of that year. I was able to watch them online however, at a convenient time in my motel room at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

In this sense the internet has dramatically increased public and scholarly access to materials which in the past would have been available only in library archives. Readers are encouraged to follow links where provided in the text, and to watch for themselves examples of contemporary political communication such as Hillary Clinton’s controversial ‘3 a.m.’ spot for the 2008 presidential campaign on YouTube.

As is customary, the time which has elapsed between the previous edition and this one saw numerous changes in the political complexion of governments all over the world. The US saw the election of its first black president, and the UK of its first coalition government since World War II. After the resignation of Kevin Rudd in June 2010 Australia saw the appointment of its first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, who was subsequently elected to office on August 21 of that year. In Iceland following the collapse of that country’s banking system in the global credit crunch of 2008, a lesbian feminist, Johanna Sigurdardottir, was elected prime minister. In June 2010 she ‘married’ her partner under the terms of an Icelandic law defining marriage as a union between two consenting adults regardless of sex.

Governments come and go, then, but the need for and importance of effective political communication, using all the tools made available by advancing technology, continues to be central to the democratic process everywhere. I trust that this fifth edition will continue to assist students, teachers and researchers in understanding the principles and practices applied by political actors of all kinds, everywhere in the world where communication with democratically empowered publics is deemed important.

Brian McNair  
December 2010

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