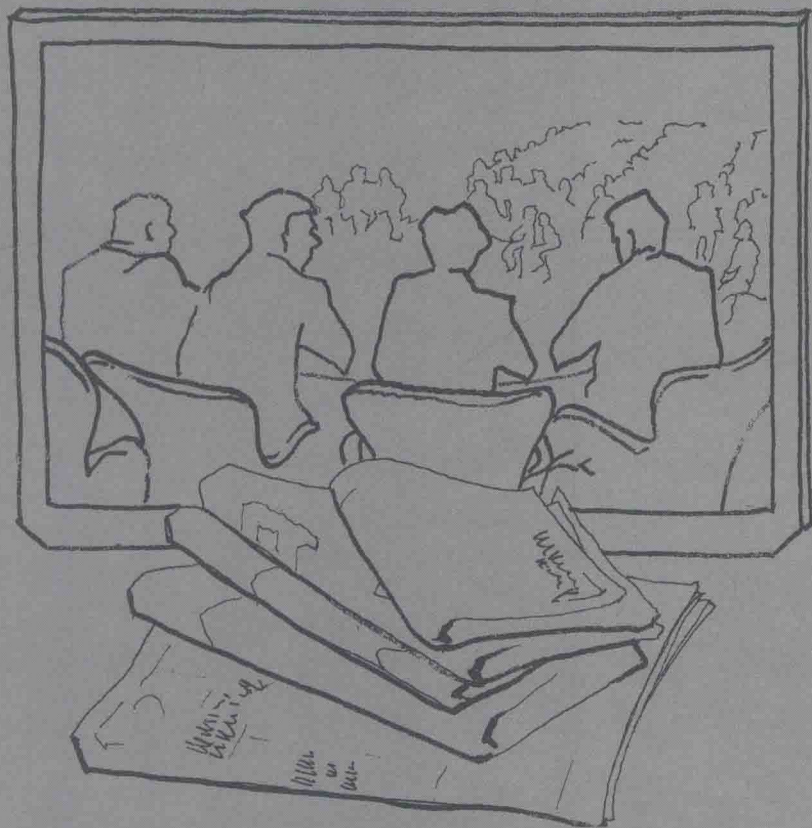
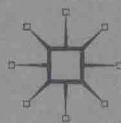


# Political Culture and Media Genre

## *Beyond the News*



Kay Richardson,  
Katy Parry *and*  
John Corner



# Political Culture and Media Genre

## Beyond the News

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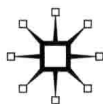
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*Also by Kay Richardson*

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CRITICAL IDEAS IN TELEVISION STUDIES

TELEVISION FORM AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

THE ART OF RECORD

THEORISING MEDIA

# Illustrations

## Tables

A.1	Number of TV programmes included in each sample period	193
A.2	Number of radio programmes included in each sample period	193
A.3	Number of newspaper print items included in each sample period	194
A.4	Number of blog posts included in each sample period	194
A.5	Totals for the audit	194

## Figures

2.1	Martin Rowson cartoon from the <i>Guardian</i>	61
2.2	Mac cartoon from the <i>Daily Mail</i>	62
2.3	Adams cartoon from the <i>Daily Telegraph</i>	63
2.4	Garland cartoon from the <i>Daily Telegraph</i>	64
2.5	Steve Bell cartoon from the <i>Guardian</i>	65
2.6	Kerber and Black cartoon from the <i>Daily Mirror</i>	67
2.7	Andy Davey cartoon from the <i>Sun</i>	68

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# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>About the Authors</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Broadcasting Beyond the News: Performing Politics	17
2 The Political World in Print – Images and Imagination	46
3 Politicality and the Web – Tracking the Cross-Currents	74
4 Media Audiences and Public Voices – Terms of Engagement	102
5 Mediation and Theme	134
The Forms and Functions of Genre in Mediated Politics	167
<i>Appendix 1: Timeline for 2010</i>	187
<i>Appendix 2: Notes on the Auditing Process</i>	190
<i>Appendix 3: Audit Details</i>	193
<i>Appendix 4: Focus Group Design</i>	195
<i>Notes</i>	198
<i>References</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	217

# Introduction

This book is a contribution to the growing international and interdisciplinary research on media, communication and politics. Its particular interest is in the ways that politics is dramatized, joked about and expressed within the world of entertainment, understanding that these make an important contribution to the way that political ideas, feelings and values are circulated in society. Forms of storytelling, fantasy, farce and satire provide powerful and rich indicators of the relationship between a national political system and a national political culture, acting both as expressions of, and as resources for, the wider play of imagination. Our own focus is primarily on Britain, though the scholarly context for research of this kind is an international one. The recent increase in the range and scale of media output, extending to the culture of the internet, has added to the significance of media use as an everyday practice of people acting as consumers and also as national citizens, and has deepened and broadened transnational aspects of mediated politics as well.

Taking its cue from the growing interest in both humanities and social-science research in 'political culture' (a notion defined and discussed below), our book seeks to develop improved conceptualization of how the media operate in this arena, based on empirical findings from our own recent research in the British context. Such an inquiry is made particularly pertinent at a time when British politics is undergoing a number of shifts in its party-political identity and its stylings as well as in the kinds of domestic and international challenges it faces. Questions about 'spin', party 'branding', the misuse of expense allowances by elected politicians and the broader mistrust of the political class have all variously become salient themes in the national culture, as have the various attempts of politicians to announce a 'new politics', which offers

fresh terms of public transparency and honesty, including those which were articulated during the 2010 election and the subsequent period of government formation and initial policy declarations. The rest of this introduction explains some of our theoretical concepts with reference to the main literatures of research (on political culture, political communications 'beyond the news', and media genre); positions national research within an international context; briefly outlines the chapter sequence; and gives a short account of the empirical materials we drew on in our primary analyses.

## **Political communication and political culture**

There are three broad literatures of research into which our work can be placed and from which it takes its primary references. First of all, and most obviously, there is the literature of media research on the range of practices and forms we have examined. This is brought into our scheme of analysis regularly as it relates to television, radio, newspaper writing, cartoons and a range of web-based formats, and it is too diverse to benefit from an attempt at general summary here. However, our broad relationship to the other two literatures, that of media-political relations and the more focused one centred on issues of 'political culture' (even if this designation is not always the one preferred), can usefully be sketched out in general outline, to be elaborated on and developed in relation to specific chapter content.

There is vast and growing international literature on media-political relations, and what is still frequently called 'political communication', although use of this established term often implies a dual focus on political media management and political journalism that is misleading in relation to the primary concerns of this book. Nevertheless, the wider set of questions about how 'politics' and 'media' interconnect, particularly insofar as public knowledge and civic understanding are at issue, are ones to which we want to connect the analytic findings of our study. These questions are becoming more frequently asked within political science, despite a longstanding tendency to overlook media systems when discussing political structures and processes, or to regard them as fitting only for marginal, sub-specialist attention. However, for some time they have been asked within the developing interdisciplinary area of media and cultural studies, where they have been addressed at different levels of generality but with a growing body of empirical, including historical, investigation, as our references later in this introduction indicate. Within the broad 'political communications' literature,

there has been a marked tendency to see the relationship of media to politics in terms of a cause for anxiety, as 'media logic' (see, for instance, the account in Dahlgren, 1995) or the effects of 'mediatization' (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008; Livingstone, 2009) become more central to policy formulation and to the whole business of political claims-making and political performance. Those societies in which the media are most intensively commercialized or are undergoing further commercialization have often produced a strong 'critical' literature of this kind, but in recent years even European nations with previously strong public service commitments in broadcasting have seen these commitments reduced, so it is not surprising that the critical perspective is internationally familiar and dominant in many publications and conference proceedings. Not everyone has seen a comprehensively negative tendency however. Some have commented on the increased inclusiveness of political mediation through simplified, dramatized and personalized formats and the very large number of people who now have access to political information and debate (although the very terms, systemic and discursive, upon which popular 'accessibility' has been achieved is the departure point of criticism by others).<sup>1</sup> Continuing and emerging kinds of 'critical' journalism have also been noted, placing those who hold power under questioning and scrutiny. More recently, the potential of 'new media' to resist the techniques of media management, which dominated in previous decades, to allow the increased flow of 'leaks' and 'unofficial' sources of information (including those from people who would not previously have had any means of public exchange) and to permit new forms of political engagement, has been one of the most intensively researched themes in the whole area of international media research.<sup>2</sup>

Quite where the borderlines of 'the political' lay, how far it is viewed as a quite specific, professionalized realm of action or as a dimension of broader public and private life, has been the subject of debate not only within research upon political communication but within the main body of political science itself. In particular, the relationship of a political system to the economic, corporate and legal systems, nationally and internationally, have been regular points of attention, not surprisingly so given the dynamics of globalization, the effect of which has been to reduce national autonomy, the space for independent national action, in a number of ways not always formally acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> Some writers have used the term 'politicality' (see, for instance, the usage in Haines, 1979; and Buckley, 2010) to indicate the various aspects, and different 'strengths', of the political that can be identified in particular activities

and discourses, some of which might not be self-identified as being to do with politics at all but are part of the way in which politics is constructed and related to from the broader locations of social space and everyday life. The term has the advantage of displacing any unified and stable sense of 'the political' in favour of a more contingent and constitutive set of elements. Although our primary concern in this book is with the portrayal of professional political activity at a national level (the 'political' in its major institutionalized forms), these more extensive connections with the 'elements' are very important to parts of our analysis, as our central use of the term 'culture' indicates.

If 'politics' is by no means a term indicating self-evident boundaries, then to place 'culture' after it risks blurring matters further and this brings us to our second range of conceptual and analytic reference points. 'Culture' often suggests, sometimes with great imprecision, the wider, diffuse area of meanings and values surrounding a given activity or sphere (e.g. football culture, youth culture, drugs culture). It often does so in awkward relationship to the idea of 'culture' as essentially about the arts and expressive activity. The two meanings frequently leak into each other, not surprisingly given that, as in our study, questions essentially about aesthetic form are often connected back to questions about underlying social values. Sometimes the leakage has a strategic convenience (as, for example in the meaning of the title 'European City of Culture', which is an arts-led usage but one with a strongly affirmative 'local ways of life and values' resonance). Sometimes there is uncertainty or ambivalence as to quite which emphasis is being placed (the idea of 'working-class culture' is notorious for generating debates around this uncertainty). 'Political culture' can be used to indicate the area that surrounds the activities of politicians within the formal political system, to be a designator of 'their' world, variously perceived by the rest of society, and inhabited mostly by politicians, professional administrators and, perhaps only as part-time residents, by political journalists. In Britain, the term 'Westminster Village' conveys something of the self-enclosed and institutionally focused nature of the idea, as does the notion of the 'political class' as indicating an elite separate in important ways from the rest of society. However, 'political culture' also has an established usage in political science and political sociology (see, for instance, Almond, 1956; Somers, 1995; Berg-Schlosser, 2009) as a term indicating the wider range of orientations, norms and perceptions within which a political system is embedded. The usage is sometimes to be found in comparative work on different political systems and is routinely subject to debate about how best to research it sociologically (again, see

Berg-Schlosser, 2009). It is then of interest how this usage, one close in its general descriptive profile to the sense in which this book will use the term, relates to the idea of 'civic culture', the sphere of meanings and values that embraces all who are citizens.<sup>4</sup> Lacking the explicit core reference to political structures and processes, 'civic culture' is a more diffuse, dispersed idea, ranging from the perspectives surrounding types of committed civic action to the less self-conscious, intermittent and partial sense of the 'civic self' that informs everyday life for many people. This is a 'civic self' routinely invoked by, for instance, paying taxes, responding to various changes in national and local government regulations and attending to media accounts of political persons and events.

We shall keep the ideas of 'political culture' (in its broad and narrow meanings) and of 'civic culture' in focus throughout this book, their relationship through media practices, and often their overlap, being a part of our investigative agenda since our material connects both with the sphere of professional politics and the broader setting of values and patterns of awareness, consent and concern within whose framing terms the business of this sphere, as 'public business', is organized and conducted. However, there is a third notional space we want to consider too, that of 'popular culture'. Again, this lacks a focused centre and is immediately diffuse in implications, although it is now routinely seen to be framed in terms of the entertainment and leisure industries and those cultural productions, including media productions, which have met with sufficient levels of market success to justify their description as 'popular'. This gives it a pronounced 'arts and expression' emphasis rather than that sociological–anthropological emphasis ('practices and values') activated in uses of 'political' and 'civic' culture. Always a contested area in terms of its definition and values through its very etymology (see Williams, 1976; Hall, 1981), 'popular' culture carries a resonance, of the choices of 'ordinary people', which cannot easily be ignored within the conventional terms of democratic society.

One of the growth areas in recent research on media–political relations has been the examination of how politics relates to 'popular culture', constituting a special focus within the framework of those broader questions concerning the media and politics relationship, and the more general connections with the 'cultural', which we noted above. We indicate some of these studies below and then at points in the following chapters, since they are a primary reference point for much of our argument. They give emphasis to the political significance of the entertaining, the comic and to the apparently trivial, whereas the

framings of 'political culture' and 'civic culture' have tended to exclude or marginalize these in favour of the 'serious'. However, throughout the book we shall regularly return to the ways in which all three designated areas, with their recognisable centres of gravity, interconnect, and the ways that the changing forms of this interconnection carry implications both for what 'politics' is now and how 'the media' portray it.

### **Mediated politics: in the news and 'beyond the news'**

In media-political relations, it is the journalistic treatment of politics that has conventionally received the lion's share of attention among political communication scholars. And although, in Britain as elsewhere, media coverage of political life spreads well beyond traditional print and broadcast news discourse, it is important to note that a great deal of this range takes the national news agenda as its point of departure. In this section we comment on 'political news' as a contemporary cultural phenomenon, to provide us with a baseline of our own for the purposes of later discussion. Our primary point of reference is to Britain, but as our indicative references show, the British experience has considerable international resonance.

Political journalists can 'enjoy' close relationships with politicians in what has been referred to as a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship (Louw, 2005); however, issues of perceived spin and obfuscation from politicians, along with hostility and combative questioning from journalists, can lead to each blaming the other for public disaffection and cynicism about politics. Politicians might agree that journalists should hold them to account and interrogate their policies, but they can become antagonized by what they see as the media's insatiable appetite for gaffes and scandals, dubbing it a 'feral beast tearing people and reputations to bits' (Blair, 2007: see also Lloyd, 2004). Journalists in turn counter that their critical, inquisitorial approach is necessary to combat the pre-tested, packaged and highly spun versions of policies that politicians present to the public via the news domain.

Political news does not just cover, then, the serious 'hard news' of governance, or reasoned debate between political elites, but gaffes, trivia and revelations about politicians' behaviour and character 'behind closed doors'. The ever-shifting professional values and presumptions of 'what counts' as political news, with the serious 'hard' subjects apparently making room for more personalized 'soft' subjects and tabloid treatments, make any definition prone to certain strains and fuzziness around the borders. Furthermore, battles for control over where the



lines are drawn and conflicting messages from politicians and journalists on what counts as politically relevant information appear to be increasingly contested in the public arena. The manoeuvrings of mediated politics, characterized variously through the years as pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1961), spin, packaging (Franklin, 1994) and 'PR-ization of politics' (Louw, 2005), can become the subject rather than the covert processes of political news.

The dominance of the 'agenda setting' elite politicians in the news has traditionally relegated ordinary citizens or the public to a minor role in mediated political life; a tendency that, certainly in TV news, has been found to reinforce the perceived distance and disconnection between official political news and the public's own experiences and activities (Lewis et al., 2005; Couldry et al., 2007). As Dahlgren writes, citizens as spectators 'cannot easily translate journalistic information into civic knowledge and practices', a fault not only of the way political life is organized but also of 'how the news portrays citizens, giving very few clues to support civic identities and agency' (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 130). As noted earlier, where political news discourse fails in encouraging civic engagement, a number of authors believe that features of popular culture could enhance democratic life, both where its influence has seeped into political life, even redefining 'what constitutes politics' (ibid., p. 137), and in popular entertainment formats (van Zoonen, 2003, 2005; Coleman, 2006). For example, politicians may choose to appear on non-news TV formats, such as chat shows, to avoid the penetrating questioning of political interviewers, but such appearances can feed back into the news cycle if they 'slip up' or choose to announce a new policy. However, politicians should beware of circumventing the traditional routes for announcing policy, since snubbed political journalists are keen to point out politicians' transgressions to the public. The politician meanwhile gambles that the popular talk show will receive a larger audience than the political commentary of the journalist. But the 'non-political political interview' also contributes to a style of politics in which both the politician and presenter perform their roles as media celebrities in a more relaxed and wide-ranging setting than afforded by the restricted, sound-bite culture of the news. On the internet, publicized webchats with politicians, within discussion forums such as Mumsnet, can target effectively a certain section of the electorate, addressing their particular concerns while also promoting their own efforts at digital interactivity. The terms 'personalization of politics', 'lifestyle politics' and 'celebrity politician', linked intrinsically to the dominance of TV as the defining medium for political life, have now received a good deal of attention