JOURNALIST–SOURCE RELATIONS, MEDIATED REFLEXIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF POLITICS

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This essay discusses journalist–source relations but with an emphasis on how such relations influence the understanding and behaviour of politicians. It explores the issue through empirical work conducted at the site of the UK Parliament at Westminster. Findings are based on semi-structured interviews with 60 Members of Parliament (MPs) and 20 national political journalists. The research findings initially confirmed many of the observations of earlier studies in the field. UK journalist–source relations still resemble Gans' (1979) original "tug-of-war" description of an ever-shifting power balance between the two sides. Such interactions, in turn, are reflected in more compliant or adversarial news coverage. Of greater interest here, the interviews also revealed that such relations have come to play a significant role in the micro-level politics of the political sphere itself. This is because reporter–politician relations and objectives have become institutionalised, intense and subject to a form of "mediated reflexivity". Consequently, politicians have come to incorporate such reporter interactions into their daily thinking and behaviour. As such, journalists are seen as more than a simple means of message promotion to the public. They also act, often inadvertently, as information intermediaries and sources for politicians trying to gauge daily developments within their own political arena.

Introduction

Much of the literature on journalist–politician relations has focused on how an evolving balance of power between the two sides influences political news coverage. On the one hand, politicians need to manage journalists to project their messages to citizens. On the other, for news media to fulfil its "fourth estate" role journalists have to maintain their professional autonomy and to be able to hold politicians to account. Therefore, the relations question is significant as such interactions influence mass news outputs and, consequently, public engagement with political institutions. The alternative question addressed here is how do such relations influence politicians and the internal political sphere directly? In other words, how do such interactions alter politicians' understanding and behaviour within the social space of a parliament?

This question was explored through semi-structured interviews with 60 Members of the UK Parliament (MPs) and 20 national political journalists. The research offered much to confirm the significance of evolving journalist–source relations for news production. At the same time many interviewee responses, especially at the senior level, suggested that such forms of interaction also play an important part in the micro-level politics of Westminster itself. Relations and objectives are not simply one of exchange or conflict but, also, have

steadily become institutionalised, intense and subject to a form of "mediated reflexivity". As a result, they have come to serve a number of other cognitive and behavioural functions for MPs operating at the heart of the political process. Politicians, when talking to journalists, in addition to seeking publicity, also try to influence political agendas, convey messages to others and/or pick up multiple forms of useful information. These include knowledge about party rivals and opponents, political moods and points of consensus, and shifting levels of support for political factions and policies. Under such conditions source and journalist roles have further merged as reporters themselves come to function as political actors, sources and information intermediaries.

Journalist–Source Relations: Impacting on News and Politics

The relationship between journalists and political sources has come to be recognised as a key discursive focus for debate on the news media's effective functioning in democratic societies. The nature of such reporter–source exchanges clearly has a significant influence on the shape of news content and thus public understanding of politics.

Most work in this area has looked directly at issues of control and power when journalists and sources meet and, accordingly, how such shifting relations are reflected in news outputs. Politicians seek favourable media coverage by attempting to manage reporters. This objective clashes with "fourth estate" professional norms which, in the Anglo-American tradition, stress the need for journalist autonomy and an oppositional stance that holds powerful sources to account. Such antithetical relations have featured in many post-war journalist and "spin doctor" accounts (Gaber, 1998; Jones, 1995, 2002; Klein 1996; Kurtz, 1998; Lloyd, 2004; Maltese, 1994; Price, 2005; Woodward, 2006). For many media sociologists, however, the public image of media–source conflict is only part of the story. On a day-to-day basis the relationship is one of uneasy exchange and reliance. Both sides need each other but pursue alternative professional objectives (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Ericson et al., 1989; Hallin, 1994; Palmer, 2000; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Schudson, 2003). Politicians need publicity and journalists need high-level access and story information. Since both sides need to co-operate to fulfil their goals, an ongoing "tug of war" or "tango dance" (Gans, 1979) takes place with control shifting from one side to the other. Reporting fluctuates, becoming more compliant or more critical of governments, accordingly.

Consequently, the question of general control has shifted to ask: which side is in control more often and why? In the majority of studies the conclusion is that political sources are and for several reasons. As Sigal (1973) pointed out, it is sources which instigate the large majority of stories. This is something confirmed subsequently in many studies in different times and places (Bennett, 2003; Lewis et al., 2008; Reich, 2006; Strombock and Nord, 2006). "Beat" reporters become dependent on the regular supply of information subsidies supplied by institutional sources (Fishman, 1980; Franklin, 1997; Gandy, 1982; Tiffen, 1989). The post-war expansion of the public relations industry, employed predominantly by powerful sources, has further increased this journalist reliance on sources (Davis, 2002; Ewen, 1996; Lewis et al., 2008; Miller and Dinan, 2007). Such is the level of journalist dependency on sources that, when politicians reach a broad consensus on key issues, reporting becomes less pluralistic and critical (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1994).

Accompanying this institutionalised dependency are a host of other powerful source means of applying pressure, such as controlling access, "flak", "spin", "pseudo events", legal threats and "embedded journalism" (see variously, Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Boorstin, 1962; Miller, 2004; Nelson, 1989). Sources, whether by fostering information dependency or by more covert means, have regularly gained the upper hand. More often than not journalists are forced into the role of being "secondary definers" to more powerful "primary definer" politicians (Hall et al., 1978). By such means, regardless of politician differences, news becomes ideologically narrow as political interpretation, story framing and choice are restrained (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980; Hall et al., 1978, Herman and Chomsky, 2002 [1988]).

However, accounts do vary considerably in the degree of control they perceive sources to have. News values or "schema", deadlines, and ratings pressures, all serve to limit and shape what journalists take up and how they frame their stories, often to the detriment of sources (Ericson et al., 1989; Hallin, 1994; Palmer, 2000; Patterson, 1994; Tiffen, 1989). For some (Reich, 2006; Stromback and Nord, 2006), although sources may initially supply information, journalists then take over in terms of following up the story and the final packaging of the raw material. The post-war period has indeed been characterised by the rise of soundbite, negative and confrontational reporting of politicians (Patterson, 1994). For others the damage done to powerful sources, by revelatory pieces and/or the media pack, can rapidly bring down a powerful source, party or organisation (Palmer, 2000; Tiffen, 1999). Ultimately, this means that political sources, while trying harder to manage journalists, also increasingly appear to be bending to the influences of journalists and news "media logic" (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Meyer, 2002; Thompson, 1995).

This naturally directs the research question back to asking: in what ways does the media–source relationship influence the behaviour of politicians and day-to-day politics within political institutions? Several studies have tackled this question hypothetically, or tangentially, as part of other research questions. A handful of studies have focused on the issue more explicitly. These findings, together, contribute to the following speculative account of the part played by journalists in the social sphere of politics.

First, parliaments tend to be confined social spaces where numerous personal, political exchanges take place between political actors, including journalists. Politicians, working in any legislative assembly, are continually engaged in numerous information-gathering and decision-making processes: balancing constituency issues and party politics, setting daily and long-term political agendas, identifying policy issues and solutions, and setting out and voting on appropriate legislation. As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) reflect, social problems do not simply emerge in general society or out of public opinion. They are "collectively defined" (Blumler, 1971) within public "social arenas" including the executive and legislative branches of government.

Arguably, in many systems, political reporting has become virtually institutionalised and therefore very much part of the social arenas of institutional politics. For example, in the White House, Capitol Hill and Westminster, journalists have on-site offices, share social facilities with politicians, and have organised political access and regular information supply. Many tend to remain in post for lengthy periods and a significant proportion have been there longer than the average legislator (see especially accounts in Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Bennett, 2003; Fishman, 1980; Hess, 1984; Schudson, 2003; Tunstall, 1996). Under such circumstances, journalist–politician relations become intensely "reflexive" (see Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994). The results are not just an ever-shifting "tug of war" which

results in the "symbolic" construction of the political in the mass-mediated public sphere (Cottle, 2003; Fishman, 1980; Manning, 2000). They also potentially impact on the social and symbolic construction of the political arena itself. Journalists have become very much a part of the political "interpretive communities" at the centre of legislative assemblies. This potentially impacts on the politics of legislative institutions in a variety of ways.

Most obviously, journalists and news content become tools for political conflict within the US and UK political arenas. For several UK scholars (Davis, 2002; Deacon and Golding, 1994; Miller et al., 1998; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994) political inter-elite conflict is frequently conducted through journalists. A key observation of three US studies (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1991) was that politicians and political journalists, either through regular dialogue or working in "coalitions", jointly contributed to several issue agendas and policy debates. For Cook (1998) and Davis (2003) such mediated forms of inter-elite conflict have in fact become an institutional feature of political reporting in the United States and United Kingdom. Politicians leak information, raise policy issues and "fly kites" in order to undermine and attack opponents at an individual and policy level (see also Flynn, 2006).

Beyond Anglo-American politics it is also clear that, in many states, journalists are expected to be allied to politicians (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In several Southern European countries there is a high degree of "party–press parallelism" with journalists and politicians closely linked and a strong journalist advocacy tradition (see also Chalaby, 1998; Mancini, 1991). In some Northern European countries diverse media source representation is institutionally and economically engineered (Murshetz, 1998; Sandford, 1997). In many emerging democracies, such as Mexico or Russia, "patron-based" or "clientelist" relationships, between journalists and sources are common (Benavides, 2000; Roudakova, 2008).

From another perspective journalists also contribute to the information-gathering and cognitive processes of politicians themselves. This is because politicians have a high level of social interaction with reporters, during which they potentially gain information and derive meaning useful to their political objectives. So, a few studies have noted how politicians do, at times, look to journalists to provide useful information of an "expert" nature. Herbst (1998; see also Lewis et al., 2008) observed that political actors regarded correspondents as "crystallisers of public opinion" on policy issues. Parsons (1989) recorded the importance of financial journalists in discussions on, and shifts in, economic policy. Kull and Ramsey (2000) noted that foreign affairs reporters had become very much part of the "foreign policy community" that guided foreign policy.

For others, relations may have become more significant still. They have contributed to the shaping of social and cognitive frameworks which, in turn, influence agendas and set the parameters for understanding, dialogue and legislative outcomes. For Baumgartner and Jones (1993) they feed into the "policy subsystems" which define the available choice of legislative solutions. Cook's (1998) "new institutionalism" approach argues that, as the three branches of government have become larger and more complex, so news media have come to play a vital intermediary part in cross-government exchanges. So institutionalised has this become that all sides contribute to the formation of a very specific "bounded rationality". This both constrains and enables individual politician choices and social patterns in and around the political centre (see alternative accounts in Davis, 2007; Patterson, 1994). Consequently, not only do agendas and policies rise and fall, so do individuals and political factions. Thus, as Becker (1963) initially posited, and Hall

et al. (1978) developed, a "hierarchy of credibility", in which the "primary definer" status of individual political actors and positions, becomes established. This is not only via the media to wider society but, also, within the socio-political arena of a parliament.

In effect, it might be suggested that the journalist–source relationship potentially influences politicians and micro-level politics just as it does journalism and news production. Such relations are incorporated into the cognitive and behavioural processes of politicians. Reporters have become one key component of the social and cultural construction of the political centre and the business of politics itself.

Research Findings

The analysis presented here is based on semi-structured interviews with 60 Members of the UK Parliament (MPs) and 20 political journalists. Politicians were themselves selected in terms of their roles as elected MPs (50) and Members of the House of Lords (10), by party and gender in representative ratios reflecting the current Parliament (2005–), and as a mix of front-bench (30 existing/former ministers or shadow ministers) and back-bench MPs (30). Half the journalists worked for national newspapers. The other half was a mix of national broadcast, wire service and online reporters/bloggers. Politicians were asked a series of media and communication-oriented questions. These included specific questions about their relations with journalists, why they talked to them and their general views on journalism/"the media" and its influences on politics. Reporters were asked the same questions but with reference to politicians and politics. With time constraints not all interviewees were asked every question. Interview responses were aggregated to give quantitative summaries but also analysed at a qualitative, interpretive level. The interview material offered ample evidence with which to explore the media–source relationship from both perspectives.

Media–Source Relations: Trust, Exchange and Conflict in the Tango

When asked directly about "relations" *per se*, the majority of interviewee accounts tended to fall within Gans' (1979) "tug of war" summary. Over half the 53 politicians questioned, including 11 former cabinet ministers, described their relations very much in terms of the two-way exchanges typical of many earlier such studies (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Schudson, 2003). The predominant relationship was between politicians and journalists working on the local or regional news outlets that existed in an MP's constituency. The majority of senior politicians (ministers, shadow ministers, committee chairs) were likely to have established additional close relations with national political and policy specialist reporters. For a majority, relationships simply revolved around the need for professional exchange. A third (half of former ministers) described it as a necessary "two-way relationship". When asked why they talked to journalists, four out of every seven said they did so because they wanted to promote themselves and their policies, their party or committee, to a wider public. A majority of journalists offered an equivalent summing-up of relations. Just under half explained that they needed to make close contact in order to gain "off-the-record" or behind the scenes material. Just under half spoke of the need to establish themselves within their own profession by gaining prestigious contacts and obtaining the kind of inside information that could lead to "scoops":

> It's a trade we're in, you know. So we are people pursuing different trades, but we exchange ... self-interested tradesmen is how I would say the relationship between a politician and a journalist is, and it requires trust, just as if you were doing a cash transaction with somebody for goods that are not actually determined until maybe days later when they appear in print. (Joe Murphy, Editor, 11 April 2007)[1]

A few key factors were frequently mentioned as influencing the power basis of those relationships. In previous studies (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tiffen, 1989; Tunstall, 1996) such things as time, news values, information resources, professional hierarchies, information monopolies and competition on both sides, all have had a bearing on who leads the dance. Several factors were mentioned by interviewees here. Just under one in five spoke of relations being affected by the rise of professional media managers and political advisors. One-fifth of journalists said relations were influenced by the political outlook of the news producer they worked for. Several journalists and MPs said that 24-hour news and the multiplicity of new media outlets had strongly affected relations and professional behaviour. The most mentioned influence was "professional hierarchies". Twenty interviewees talked about the hierarchies that formed and therefore influenced journalist–politician access. Ordinary back-bench MPs rarely had good access to senior national reporters but government ministers had regular structured access to them. Journalists were far more willing to talk to government ministers than to their opposition equivalents and shadow ministers stated that they often had to exploit populist news values to get the attention of correspondents. Clearly, this restricted the plurality of opinions being reflected in political coverage (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1994), particularly if journalists considered the opposition to be weak or uninteresting.

For most interviewees the distinct professional identities of the two sides, as well as a sense of "the other", were maintained. All were aware that such exchanges could be mutually beneficial but, equally, that they could bring the two sides into conflict. Thus the terms "cautious", "love–hate" and "trust" came up frequently when describing relations. Over half the journalists and two-fifths of politicians (over half the former ministers) used the word "trust" when describing the relationship. Reporters attempted to maintain "friendly" or "civil" relations and a third stated that being seen to be too close to certain MPs would compromise their professional standing with peers and other politicians. At the same time, most MPs, particularly ministers and shadow ministers, were fairly weary of journalists. They were thus likely, with a few exceptions, to mistrust reporters or express antagonism towards "the media". One in five politicians talked of the power of the "journalist pack" and "media feeding frenzies":

> The truth is journalists are out for one thing: a story. You know, they may be your friend, appear to be your friend today but tomorrow they may be cutting your throat because you happen to be the subject of a good story ... at the end of the day you don't really have a relationship with a journalist. What you do is you establish basically a series of contacts, because if you have a relationship with someone then it has some obligations. This isn't really a relationship with obligations, it's a relationship with mutual usability. (Iain Duncan Smith, MP, 25 April 2006)

Overall, antagonism and mistrust seemed rather more common between journalists and Labour MPs (the party of government), thus, further suggesting that reporters did see part of their function as holding government to account. Over a quarter of Labour MPs talked disdainfully of the media pack and a quarter stated that the news media, as a whole,

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bred cynicism about the political process more generally. Several said there had been a decline in the ethics and quality of journalism in recent years and several said that, at times, the press operated unashamedly as an "opposition". In turn, half the reporters interviewed talked critically about the rise of party media management techniques, particularly by the Labour Government. Several stated that information release was more controlled and that access to ministers was increasingly difficult with civil servants and advisors acting as gatekeepers (see also accounts in Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Jones, 2002). Criticism of politicians was generally more likely to come from journalists employed in news outlets hostile to the Labour Government.

Thus, in many respects, the same types of relationship, based on a mix of antagonism and useful exchange, still seemed much in evidence. For most interviewees, most of the time, it was a relationship of cautious co-operation that benefited both sides. At the same time, conflict and mistrust were common and either side were capable of, and frequently did, damage the other. This in turn was reflected in news coverage that could be either too compliant (e.g., pre the Iraq invasion, over constitutional reform, energy policy) or too aggressive (e.g., NHS coverage, the forced resignation of certain Labour ministers).

Journalists and Mediated Reflexivity in the Political Social Sphere

Interviews and observation suggested that, in various ways, journalists had become very much part of the political social sphere at Westminster. All accredited lobby journalists have office space on site. Successful ones, because of their experience and contacts, are likely to have worked the Parliamentary beat far longer than reporters in other equivalent news sections. Several interviewees had been there for more than 20 years and had kept some of their political contacts from the start (see similar accounts in Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Tunstall, 1996). Almost all MPs interviewed also had a very high level of contact with journalists (local, regional and/or national). In all, just over two-thirds of MPs interviewed talked to journalists, on average, once a day. Several, especially senior politicians, might have several journalist conversations per day and, at busy periods, exchanges could be more than hourly. The other third, with two exceptions, talked to journalists once or a few times per week. Consequently, UK politician–reporter relations, regardless of their antagonisms, have evolved to become fairly institutionalised and socially integrated:

> We play football matches, cricket matches against MPs, so you get to know them sort of away from this place. There is a thing called the Parliamentary Golf Society ... working in the same building, being able to go into the members' lobby at certain times and talk to a minister face to face, rather than down the telephone, obviously does make it a different kind of relationship. (Philip Webster, Editor, 9 August 2006)
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> Most of my colleagues are embedded journalists ... I think it's natural that you get a little bit attached to the people who are looking after you. But I think that the way in which lobby journalists become manifestations of the political system is quite disturbing. (Peter Oborne, Commentator, 19 March 2007)

Over time, and with such levels of personal interaction, the two professions have become hugely knowledgeable about the other and this, in turn, has made relationships extremely reflexive. Just over four-fifths of MPs asked had had formal media training

and/or previous experience in journalism or public relations/affairs. At the time of writing each of the current party leaders (Brown, Cameron and Clegg) had earlier careers in one or more of these professions. Many MP interviewees spoke about the ease of guessing future headlines and slants on the way issues and announcements would be covered. They appeared to have an extensive knowledge of specific publications, reporter routines and news values. Conversely, political journalists had an extensive knowledge of how Westminster, the parties and individual politicians operated:

> when I first came in [1997] ... understanding who was important and who wasn't, you know, who were the senior political editors and correspondents, and who ... needed to be talked to and worked with, and how quickly you needed to be on top of responding ... within the time I was in Government, it changed from four to six hours turnaround to about half an hour. (David Blunkett, MP, 20 March 2006)
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> I've known them [Gordon Brown and Tony Blair] for 23 years ... So it's not in any sense a social relationship or anything like that, but when we see each other ... they know what to make of me, they know how to handle me, and also, vice versa ... they know where I come from and all that. And over that period you learn about their strengths and weaknesses too. (Peter Riddell, Commentator, 30 August 2006)

Over time, relationships become more than one of professional exchange of publicity for inside access as the two sides have found other common objectives. A quarter of politicians said they maintained regular contact with two or three trusted journalists. Just over a fifth talked of having worked together with journalists on particular campaigns or issues (see similar findings in the United States in Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Protess et al., 1991). Lobby journalists at Westminster have come to play such a role, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. In part this is because of the obvious existence of "press–party parallelism" and a strong inclination among many UK journalists towards "influencing politics" (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004). Likewise, a majority of the journalists talked of their efforts to develop closer relations with select politicians over time. Just under half talked of having worked closely together with politicians on campaigns or issues. Six spoke of how rising MPs and junior ministers actively sought to cultivate such closer, long-term relations with them.

The combination of journalist institutionalisation, positional longevity, intense exchange and reflexivity, means that politicians find many uses for their reporter contacts. In many cases, again primarily at the senior level, politicians are likely to actually seek specific presentational or policy advice from political correspondents. Seven reporters, almost all broadcasters, said that MPs and ministers had asked for information on the presentation of a policy or themselves. Certain experienced journalists were also sought out for policy advice with some considered to have an in-depth knowledge in key policy areas. Eight (shadow) ministers said they spoke to journalists because they wanted their "expert" opinion. Eight of the journalists also said that (shadow) ministers had sought policy advice from them (see related findings in the United States in Herbst, 1998; Kull and Ramsey, 2000; Patterson, 1994). Advice was sought either on the basis of having close relations/"friendships" or as part of the professional exchange, i.e. story information for presentational advice rather than publicity:

> If X said "how would it play in the media?" then I might well have an opinion on it in part because I'm probably trying to persuade them to give me the story ... You know "If we

did this, how would it play?" and I'm saying, "Well why don't you do it via me"? (Nick Robinson, Editor, 27 February 2007)

I certainly got to know in the course of my political life a good many of the *Financial Times* specialist correspondents, and usually valued their judgements ... somebody like Richard Norton-Taylor was an absolute mine of information about security services ... Somebody like Peter Hennessey was an absolute expert on Whitehall and the structure of government ... And I certainly listened to their views, and might modify my views in the light of their reactions. (Lord Robert MacLennan, 8 February 2006)

Another common use of journalist contacts by MPs was for agenda-setting and political conflict, both between and within parties. Much of the interview material supported such an account (Cook, 1998; Davis, 2003; Mancini, 1991). This came across very clearly when MPs were asked, not about relations *per se*, but why they chose to talk to reporters. Just over half (18 of 35) of the MPs said they talked to journalists for the purposes of negotiation or conflict with one's own opponents and rivals. Just under half said they attempted to float stories to influence political debate and government policy. The same number said they talked to correspondents to push particular views. Such a conflict model was backed up by reporter accounts. Seven of the lobby journalists said that such political conflict, within the micro-political arena, was a key reason MPs talked to them. A third of interviewees from both professions said that lobby reporting was, in line with editorial news values, more oriented towards conflicts and personal dramas.

The most obvious mediated conflict taking place was that between the main parties as leaders from both sides sought to attack their opposition equivalents. However, many back-bench politicians attempted, in either the interests of their constituents or committees, to use their journalist contacts to raise issues and influence the political agenda within Parliament. Several described long-term campaigns which only influenced budgets or legislation when they gained a media profile. Several of the reporters presented corresponding accounts:

I mean one of the few tools in our armoury is publicity ... for example, on the election for the [Labour] Leader and Deputy Leader ... I went on to the Press Association, did a statement, I then telephoned the *Times, Telegraph, Independent, Guardian* and the *Sun* ... because I feel strongly about the thing, I'm going to try and influence it by giving a bit of oxygen. (Andrew Mackinley, MP, 20 March 2007)

certainly an MP who has a cause that they are trying to get on to the agenda, particularly if they're a backbencher, you will see them seeking to use the media to promote that cause and then action on it. (Adam Boulton, Editor, 31 January 2007)

Such activity was more common amongst experienced politicians with 12 of the 16 (shadow) ministers talking to journalists for such purposes. Not only did senior politicians want to attack party oppositions or raise their own agendas they often used lobby contacts to undermine other politicians and factions within their own party:

their battles have been fought out almost through spinning, and then their entourages. I think it sometimes became more vicious, like the two courts rather than the two men, and all of it's done through kind of spinning to the media ... Gordon [Brown] never ever spoke in Cabinet to question anything. If there was an issue between Gordon and Tony [Blair] they would always, you know, you'd see it in the media or they'd resolve it individually. They never ever openly argued anything. (Clare Short, MP, 18 January 2007)

Journalists as Information Sources and Intermediaries in the Political Interpretive Community

As also became clear in the interviews politicians seek another significant type of "expert" advice from journalists: knowledge of the micro-level politics of Westminster itself. Interviews with, and observation of, the MPs suggested that they moved on a non-stop treadmill of committee meetings, chamber appearances, and one-to-one meetings with other politicians, journalists and external visitors. Every day, and on a variety of issues, they gathered information, negotiated with others, and made decisions which had personal and political, as well as public, consequences. Most interviewees admitted to a reliance on others to provide summaries, quick assessments and guidance on the key aspects of a policy or other internal political issue. These included trusted party colleagues, outside advisers, assistants and, in several cases, journalists.

In essence journalists spend much of their time collecting and exchanging information on "the political", as opposed to policy, aspects of Parliament. A majority of reporter interviewees spoke of the hothouse atmosphere of the lobby where reporters constantly exchanged information and opinion as they shared facilities and attended briefings and political events. Half of the print journalists talked specifically about trying to gauge the "political mood" or predominant "narrative" on an issue or individual at the time. Conversely, 10 MPs described how there would be sudden bursts of reporter activity and exchange with politicians at key political junctures. Fourteen MPs, almost all Labour, commented on how, during higher-profile political conflict, journalists would move rapidly around trying to get quick opinions and quotes. This vox pop technique would frequently produce a perceived consensus on the politics of a policy or individual. Most of the print journalists spoke of the importance of the journalist "pack", "narrative" or "mood" in influencing both journalism and politics at Westminster. Eleven politicians also spoke about the media pack or mood in similar terms. In effect, lobby journalists continually picked up and circulated information about multiple aspects of the political process itself. As such, they contributed to the rise and fall of political agendas, policies, individual politicians and political factions within the parliamentary political sphere:

> You know, ultimately Westminster is a giant marketplace for political information and political gossip and so we're constantly trading information and passing it on ... some things you can tell people about and other things you can't, but it is one big marketplace, and there's a constant to and fro of information between journalists and politicians. (Ben Brogan, Editor, 26 April 2007)
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> And people ask your opinion. You ask theirs, you say "What do you think of this?" or "What did you make of Blair, Blair's press conference? What did you make of that answer? What do you think?" ... So you're constantly in conversation with people. (Michael White, Editor, 1 August 2006)

Individual politicians, in turn, sought out such politically significant information from journalists. A third of the political reporters spoke about MPs and ministers seeking information on some aspect of the political process itself. Similarly, just under a third of politicians, when asked about why they talked to journalists, said they were seeking information about their party, the government or some aspect of Westminster politics. Reporters, who talked constantly to politicians and were experienced political observers, were considered to be good sources of information on the daily events and shifts inside

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Parliament. This might be more general information for ordinary MPs or something more personally significant for (shadow) ministers:

> a "journalist friend" ... would telephone you and say "So-and-so's stirring it up for you" or they might even say "I had lunch with so-and-so today and he was singing your praises" ... so you've got a steer from them. They were a sort of early-warning system ... then you had to weigh that up. (Lord Cecil Parkinson, 30 January 2007)
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> the media often know more about what's going on here than MPs do ... often journalists will try and be clever and tease information out of you but generally they know stuff ... and the reality is it's inevitable that you start becoming friendly and friends with journalists, and they share information. (Sadiq Khan, MP, 1 March 2006)

At one level, this interaction, combined with actual news coverage, had a potential influence on the policy process. Twenty MPs, including 13 (shadow) ministers, believed that journalists and the media had an impact on policy and legislative debates. Usually they amplified such political debates, forced greater speed of response and, on occasion, changed policy direction altogether.

> the media can reveal what's going on in a policy debate, either before the Government would like it to be revealed or in a way that the Government prefer it not to be revealed. So they can reveal that there are disputes going on ... and that can be important when you're coming up to a knife-edge vote, and the Government is frantically trying to kind of mollify its rebellious back benchers. (Danny Alexander, MP, 28 February 2006)
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> I mean there are certain things that are tipping points, and it's hard to say why ... and in a way they're quite important for the policy too, because it's about, will the Government really hold to this line, or is this line tenable, or is it politically impossible, will they have to give way on this, that or the other, or is it anyway not working? ... And so you're looking all the time at the mood, because policy doesn't just sit there in isolation, you've got to persuade in fact quite a lot of people that you're moving in the right direction. (Polly Toynbee, Commentator, 25 August 2006)

Such conversations and exchanges also appeared to influence the rise and fall of individual (shadow) ministers and party leaders. Just under half the politicians asked, including 10 of the 16 (shadow) ministers, stated that journalists and the media had a key role to play in the rise and fall of ministers and in leadership contests. Thirteen journalists also spoke of the role of the reporter network and/or individual journalists in the movement of ministers. Eleven had similar views in relation to leadership elections. Consequently, journalists both reported on the politics of a policy or individual but, in addition, by circulating opinions and moods, had a role in those political outcomes too:

> when we had our great leadership crisis back with Iain Duncan-Smith, which obviously ended in him losing a vote of confidence, the journalists would ask everybody all the time what they thought ... every journo you spoke to, that was the first question they'd ask. And I suspect everybody said "well, it's terrible, you know, he's going to have to go". And even if they didn't say anything quite so brutal as that, then their whole body language would ... So the journalists could tell and they were very good at reflecting the real mood of the Party. (Julia Kirkbride, MP, 3 February 2006)
>
> part of that conversation is them trying to ask you what you think is going on ... you could be talking to let's say at the moment a Labour deputy leadership candidate, and

the conversation, inevitably, because it's one of the things you're going to be reporting on, comes round to, "What are their chances?" "What are people going to be looking for in a deputy leadership candidate?" "What's the best stance to have *vis-à-vis* Gordon Brown." "You've got to look like the sort of person who's going to stand up to him" or, you know, "Isn't that what Labour should be fundamentally looking for, someone who will say boo to the big beast from Fife?" (Gary Gibbon, Editor, 25 January 2007)

Conclusions

The research presented here found much to support the findings of earlier studies and the continuing core significance of the questions they pose. Although personnel, technology and the "rules of engagement" continue to shift, politician–journalist relations remain at the heart of political reporting and guided by the same overlapping but conflictual professional objectives. News outputs, in terms of objectivity, plurality and autonomy, fluctuate accordingly.

More interesting are the findings about what part journalists and reporter–MP relations play in the business of politics itself. Relationships are institutionalised, intense and reflexive as both sides have come to incorporate the other within their everyday thinking, decision-making and behaviour. Politicians have thus sought to use their relations for more than mere publicity. They have also attempted to make use of reporters as sources of information about policy, presentation and, above all, the micro-level politics of Westminster itself. As a result, journalists have themselves come to act, often inadvertently, as political sources, intermediaries and political actors.

If journalists and journalism have become increasingly influential in these roles what are the democratic implications? Such tendencies could be seen positively in terms of being an extension of news media's fourth estate role. They could also be forcing politicians to look beyond the confines of their self-referencing elite networks and encouraging pluralist diversity. On the other hand, as several point out, the professional and economic objectives of journalists frequently diverge from public interest norms. Politicians may be setting agendas, choosing and promoting policy solutions and party representatives according to the news values and routines dictated by news producers (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001; Franklin, 1997; Hallin, 1994; Meyer, 2002; Patterson, 1994; Street, 1997; Walgrave and van Aelst, 2004). Thus, "media logic" may increasingly be dictating journalist actions, their relations with politicians and, consequently, the behaviour of politicians. Such influences on the political class may be as detrimental as they are beneficial.

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Hon Iain Duncan Smith, Conservative MP for Chingford and Woodford Green, shadow cabinet minister 1997–2001, party leader 2001–3; Garry Gibbon, Political Editor for *Channel Four News*; Sadiq Khan, Labour MP for Tooting; Julia Kirkbride, Conservative MP for Bromsgrove, shadow minister 2003–4, political journalist; Andrew Mackinley, Labour MP for Thurrock, opposition whip 1993–4; Lord Robert Maclennan of Rogart, Labour government minister 1974–9, leader of Social Democratic Party 1987–8, Liberal Democrat shadow cabinet minister 1988–98; Joe Murphy, Political Editor of the *Standard*; Peter Oborne, Political Columnist for the *Daily Mail*, Contributing Editor for *The Spectator*, political journalist and commentator; Lord Cecil Parkinson, government minister 1981–3, government cabinet minister 1983, 1987–90, Chair of Conservative Party 1981–3, 1997–8; Peter Riddell, Chief Political Commentator for the *Times*; Nick Robinson, Political Editor at the BBC; Clare Short, Labour MP for Ladywood, opposition spokesperson 1985–96, shadow minister 1996–7, government cabinet minister 1997–2003; Polly Toynbee, Political Columnist for the *Guardian*; Philip Webster, Political Editor of the *Times*; Michael White, Political Editor of the *Guardian*.

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