

Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Module 3

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Introduction

1. I am Professor of Political Communication at the Department of Media and Communication, Goldsmiths College, University of London. I am also the Director of the MA Political Communication, and have been a visiting professor at departments of politics in Toulouse, Geneva and Wellington (Victoria University). I have published three books (a fourth due in 2013), 30 academic articles and book chapters, and many non-academic pieces, mostly on political communication, media and politics.

2. Two key areas of my research have focused on a) the relationship between media/journalists and news sources, and b) the influence of news media on organisations and elite groups. I have interviewed over 300 individuals from the following sectors: trade unions, corporations, finance, politics, the civil service and journalism. Most relevant to this enquiry I was engaged in a research project (2005-08) where I interviewed 60 national politicians, 20 civil servants and 25 political journalists and bloggers. Interviewees included 30 current/past (Shadow) ministers, seven select committee chairs, four permanent secretaries and 15 national political news editors. The findings of the research are relevant to most of the nine questions of the module three remit (not question 6), being especially relevant to questions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9.

3. The interviewees were asked a series of semi-structured questions (open questions applied to all). 40 of the politicians were also asked a series of closed, survey questions. The interviews, on average, produced 5,500 words of transcript material. Many themes, central to module 3, were explored. These included: the level of contact between journalists and politicians and the nature of their relations; the influence of journalists/news media on political processes at Westminster, including policy matters, legislation and the promotion/demotion of MPs; how politicians (front and back bench) used media coverage as an information source, gauge of wider opinion (Westminster and public) and agenda-setter; how concern with media/journalists influenced political and policy agendas for both government ministers and their oppositions; what policy areas were more or less likely to be aired by parties as a result of media concerns. The main findings were published in several articles and book chapters as well as in two books: *The Mediation of Power* (2007, Routledge), *Political Communication and Social Theory* (2010, Routledge). The evidence below draws mainly on this research as well as earlier sets of interviews with political journalists, politicians and political advisors/PR specialists.

Summary of Findings

4. The research led me to the following conclusions. These are supported by the research findings below:

i) Journalist and politician relations, in many ways, are antagonistic and uneasy. Both sides need each other and pursue conflicting objectives (para 5-9) as would be expected by their professional roles.

ii) It is hard to isolate and demonstrate strong and direct media influences on public policy beyond personal, anecdotal accounts (para10,11).

However, there is much related evidence which suggests that politicians and ministers are influenced by media concerns and journalist relations in a variety of ways. These do impact upon the policy process, media coverage and public debate.

iii) MPs, ministers and prime ministers pay ‘obsessive’ attention to news coverage. Most politicians are ‘media-trained’ and, increasingly, it is considered important to have strong media skills and relations, in order to be successful and be promoted (paras 13-15, 27a, 27b).

iv) Politicians of all levels have extremely high levels of contact with media owners, editors and journalists (paras 16, 17).

v) Lobby journalists are very much integrated into Parliament, both professionally and socially. Relations between reporters and politicians can be extremely close with ‘alliances’ and ‘coalitions’ forming. At times journalists may even act as unofficial advisors to MPs (paras 18, 19).

vi) Political journalists are so involved in day-to-day activities at Westminster that they have come to provide a number of useful functions for politicians. These include circulating political information including general party moods and opinions. Reporter involvement thus goes beyond simply reporting events (paras 20-23b).

vii) Politicians at all levels use journalists to try and raise issues, push agendas, influence policy debates and the passage of legislation. Journalists are aware of this. Again, this suggests that reporters are centrally involved in Parliamentary politics (paras 22, 23a, 23b).

viii) News media coverage appears to have multiple influences on the way politicians think about and react to political agendas, policy and legislation. Few admit to being personally influenced. However, many believe others, including the public, other MPs, ministers and journalists are affected. They respond accordingly (paras 24-26).

ix) Cabinet and shadow cabinet members are acutely concerned with media coverage and negative stories about personalities, sleaze or splits. They are also aware of media disinterest in detailed policy matters. They thus avoid open debate on many public policy issues. Many journalists acknowledge these failings (paras 27a-29).

x) Politician concerns and news values combine to over-emphasise certain ‘emotive’ and ‘human interest’ types of legislation beyond their importance. Crime and immigration are two policy areas which generate larger and more forceful coverage, thus encouraging too many public responses and/or legislative acts (paras 30a, 30b).

xi) Conversely, other important policy areas are neglected in coverage and therefore may fall down the policy agenda. Technical, long-term, and ‘non-newsworthy’ areas, such as pensions, energy, debt and constitutional affairs, are all too easily neglected (para 31a).

xi) The NHS, welfare state spending and European affairs are subjects all too often avoided in public debate by the parties, because of concern over media coverage. In such circumstances, public debates and policy changes do not get covered adequately as politicians try to make changes without drawing public attention. Political news media can be complicit here (paras 31b, 31c).

xii) Both news media coverage and lobby journalists can have a direct or indirect influence on political appointments, promotions and sackings within the parties (para 32).

In terms of Module 3 questions:

xiii) the public is not aware of the degree of to which journalists and politicians mix and can have shared as well as conflicting objectives (Q1). There are benefits to the system as it stands in terms of politicians releasing information to journalists, and journalists holding

politicians to account. However (Q2) there are also many drawbacks. When there are shared organisational or individual interests, the wider public interest, is neglected. This is obviously the case in matters of media policy (Q6). But it is also important in regards to a range of policy issues. In terms of the proper functioning of the press in a democracy (Q3), reporting on minor sleaze, personalities and personal conflicts, is not an adequate means of holding the powerful to account. The press need to engage with policy details, delivery and the competence of politicians. The contact of senior media figures with senior politicians does need to be logged and minute, and made publicly available, just as in any other lobbying activity (although lobbying regulation generally needs to be extended).

xiv) Plurality (Q7) is not simply served by having several media outlets or online formats. Ownership is a key consideration as those with greater ownership have greater undue influence over politicians. Limits on media ownership, both across all news media, and within each news category, needs to be applied. Equally significantly, plurality means political coverage needs to make far greater efforts to engage with interests and sources outside of Parliament itself. Too often, coverage of political matters neglects other important interests and debates outside of party political considerations. Under-funded online operations are no replacement here. Lastly, plurality of outlets does not necessarily translate into plurality in issue coverage if news media narrow their newsgathering remit to 'saleable' stories. In answer to Q4, yes political journalism is very much involved in politics as well as reporting on it. In some ways this has always been the case. In other respects, in terms of the way lobby reporting has become so institutionalised, and politicians overly concerned with media coverage and influence, this is more important. It cannot be assumed that media involvement is balanced or neutral, especially not when most of the print media are owned by right-of-centre owners and international corporations, and these overtly pursue particular agendas on, for example, Europe, finance, immigration and economic policy.

x) As argued here, media does unduly influence the policy process (Q5) on crime and immigration, Europe, the NHS. Media also neglect some very important policy areas, such as pensions, energy policy, and constitutional affairs. Politicians (Q9) quite clearly are overly-concerned with media responses on a range of policy issues. That includes media policy. It suggests politicians are likely to avoid policy areas or policy directions that run counter to prominent media organisation interests. Many established journalists acknowledge the general influences of reporting patterns on policy and debate, with a minority also including media policy itself.

Conflicted Relations Between Politicians and Journalists and Limited Media Influence on Politics

5. *History of antagonism in relationship necessary to both sides.* There exists an extensive literature on journalist relations with their political sources. This 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 stress the need for journalist autonomy and a neutral, oppositional stance that holds powerful sources to account. Such antagonisms are often highlighted in published books by political journalists and political affairs advisors. 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 an ongoing ‘tug of war’ or ‘tango dance’¹.

6. *Established politician and journalist roles and objectives.* Interviews did support such a picture in various ways. The majority of senior politicians (ministers, shadow ministers, committee chairs) were likely to have established contacts with national political and specialist journalists. A third (half of former ministers) simply described it as a necessary ‘two-way relationship’. Four out of every seven said they did so because they wanted to promote themselves, their party or particular committee, or specific policies to the public/their constituents. A majority of journalists offered a very similar 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’: (Joe Murphy, the *Standard*) ‘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’.

7. *Uneasy relations between the two sides and political fear/cynicism of media.* The terms ‘cautious’, ‘love-hate’ and ‘trust’ came up frequently when describing relations. Most politicians, particularly (shadow) ministers, were fairly weary of journalists, and were likely to mistrust reporters or express antagonism towards ‘the media’. Over a quarter of Labour MPs talked disdainfully of the media pack and a quarter stated that the news media, as a whole, bred cynicism about the political process more generally. Several said there had been a decline in the ethics and quality of journalism: (Iain Duncan Smith MP) 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 ... This isn’t really a relationship with obligations, it’s a relationship with mutual usability.’

8. *Rapid growth of government PR personnel and media management.* Parties and governments have steadily increased their numbers of public relations staff and attempted to manage their coverage and keep journalists at a distance. The rapid growth in PR personnel and communications expenditure, documented in the Thatcher years, continued apace during New Labour’s period of office. For example, from 1979 to 2006, MoD information officers from 58 to 230 (297%), the Home Office, from 27 to 145 (437%), the Prime Minister’s Office, from 6 to 24 (300%)². Most political PR advisors interviewed stated that they spent the majority of their time blocking and reacting to negative coverage: (Tim Blythe) ‘I had ten years in Whitehall, and 70 per cent of press relations there was keeping stuff out of the papers’; (Tim Collins, Conservative) ‘We spend two thirds to three quarters of the time reacting to events unfortunately’; (John Underwood, Labour) ‘Political party communications is generally more concerned with blocking hostile media coverage and crisis management than it is with proactive campaigning.’

¹Some key studies here include Gans, 1979, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, Jones, 1995, Tiffen, 1989, 2002, Barnett and Gaber, 2001, Donsbach and Patterson, 2004, Lloyd 2004.

² All figures accumulated from ‘The IPO Directory - Information and Press Officers in Government Departments and Public Corporations’ (formerly called ‘Chief Public Relations, Information and Press Officers in Government Departments, Public Corporations, etc.’). Currently called ‘The White Book’.

9. *Journalists critical of media management and 'spin'*. In turn, half the reporters interviewed talked negatively of 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. Criticism of politicians was generally more likely to come from journalists employed in news outlets hostile to the Labour Government.

10. *Difficulties in demonstrating media/journalist influence on politics and politicians*. It is notoriously difficult to demonstrate the impact/influence of media on individuals. There have been many studies although very few on influence over politicians. Demonstrating direct cause and effect is problematic with media influences hard to isolate. Individuals rarely admit to being influenced themselves. Politicians often appear to react to media but may only be doing so symbolically rather than changing policy substantively. Neither journalists or politicians, interviewed about their relations, are likely to be entirely forthcoming on this subject on account of their professional and personal interests. The existing research, from other countries, is inconclusive and often dependent on the methods chosen³.

11. *Politicians sceptical generally about news media content and direct influence on policy*. Few MPs believed news was an actual reflection of public opinion. Just under half, without prompting, described political coverage as overly 'trivial' and dominated by 'personalities' and the 'dramatic'. Many regarded even serious news coverage as lacking in sufficient policy detail. When asked about information sources for policy, news was one of the least (seventh) most mentioned information sources for government ministers. They prioritised civil servants, personal networks and interest groups well above news media. For back bench MPs it came equal fourth as a listed information source. For them it was constituents, interest groups and party whips and/or briefings that were more likely to be mentioned.

12. *Much evidence for relations being too close and media having a significant influence on the policy process*. However, there is also a substantive body of material which reveals overly close relations between journalists and politicians and a number of important media influences on the policy process. The following findings came to light specifically from my research and are relayed in five sections: unhealthy political news obsessions, institutionalised journalist-politician relations, journalist functions in politics at Westminster, multiple indirect media influences, and news influences on public policy debate.

Unhealthy News Obsessions

13. *MPs are obsessed with news coverage*. MPs were asked about their news consumption. On average, they consumed four to five different news sources each day. They read just over three newspapers on average each day. Just over two thirds also listened to radio news daily and the same amount watched television news. A third also used online news services. This finding matched up with data from a 2005 MORI survey (Duffy and Rowden, 2005: p30). Many explained to me that there was a constant news media presence in their offices; something I often observed first-hand when conducting interviews in MPs' offices. A television was on showing News 24, the Parliament Channel or Ceefax. On their computer the BBC website and tickertape news might be on. This was also the case in many civil

³ Some key studies from elsewhere include: Protess et al. (1991), Baumgartner and Jones (1993), Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993), Herbst (1998), Edwards and Wood (1999), Meyer (2002), Soroka (2002), Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006, van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011.

servant departments I visited: i.e., television news channels on and the existence of daily files of department-focused news clippings.

14. *Politicians have high knowledge of how news media operate.* Just over four fifths of those asked had had formal media training and/or had previous experience in journalism or public relations/affairs. Just over a third had had professional experience in journalism or a related profession or had written regular newspaper columns. They appeared to have an extensive knowledge of specific publications, reporter routines and news values. Many interviewees spoke about the ease of guessing future headlines and slants on the way issues and announcements would be covered, and had an extensive knowledge of many individual publications and journalists: (Ann Widdecombe MP) ‘You could work out the headline, you could write the headlines for them ... you’re nearly always right’; (Chris Bryant MP) ‘I can nearly always predict what each newspaper will say on any given issue.’

15. *Media knowledge and contacts key for new generation of frontbench politicians.* In 2008, I also investigated the biographical details of the 49 members of the Labour and Conservative Party front benches. I compared younger (under 50, largely post 2001 intake) and older (over 50, mostly pre 2001 intake). Of the younger generation, half had had careers in journalism or public relations. A third of all interviewees (MPs, journalists and civil servants) were asked about the qualities required to become a senior politician. The second most common answer was having good media skills and/or the ability to maintain good relations with journalists. The three current party leaders (David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg) all had spent some of their pre-Parliamentary careers in journalism or PR. David Cameron spent seven years in corporate public relations.

Institutionalised and Unhealthy Close Relations Between Political Journalists and Politicians

16. *High and regular level of journalist-politician contact.* The contact between politicians and news producers has become regular, systematic and institutionalised. In the 15 months following the May 2010 election, David Cameron recorded 76 meetings with media executives and editors. 25 of these were with *News International* papers and nine with representatives of the *Telegraph*. David Miliband revealed 48 meetings, 15 of which were with *News International* and six with *Trinity Mirror*. Nick Clegg noted 29 such meetings, six of which were with the *Independent* (figs. in BBC, 25.7.11). My own interviews revealed that just over two thirds of MPs talked to journalists (local and/or national), on average at least once a day, and usually several times a day. At busy periods some, usually senior politicians, said they had between 10 and 20 conversations with journalists each day. The other third talked to journalists once or several times a week. Just two spoke to journalists less often than this.

17. *Politicians and journalists mix socially and too closely.* Interviews and observation also suggested that, in various ways, lobby journalists had become very much part of the political social sphere at Westminster. Almost all the interviewees had office space on site. Several had been there for more than 20 years and had kept some of their political contacts from the start (see similar accounts in Tunstall, 1996, Barnett and Gaber, 2001). They were intimately acquainted with many leading politicians: (Philip Webster, the *Times*) ‘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 ... it obviously does make it a different kind of relationship’; (Peter Osborne, journalist, commentator) ‘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'.

18. *Many instances of very close senior politician-journalist relations and 'alliances'*. Many politicians referred to relations along the lines of being working 'alliances' or 'coalitions'. Others used terms like 'friend' or 'colleague' and would meet for social as well as professional reasons. Every government and shadow minister, without exception, felt relations essential: (Lord Cecil Parkinson) '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'; (Frank Dobson MP) You know, in any place of work it's best to have reasonably friendly relations with your working colleagues, and they [journalists] are in a sense some of our working colleagues. And I get on with a number of people'; (Kevin Maguire, the *Mirror*) 'I was always marked out as a Brown man ... I know other journalists who are seen as linked with others – Andrew Grice is seen as a Mandelson man. Others talk to Byers, some to Milburn, some to Prescott. Colin Brown, Prescott's biographer, spoke to him every weekend'.

19. *Senior politicians seek political and media advice from journalists*. In many cases, politicians sought specific presentational or policy advice from more political correspondents. Seven reporters, almost all broadcasters, said that MPs and ministers had asked for information on the presentation of a policy or themselves. Eight (shadow) ministers said they spoke to journalists because they wanted their 'expert' opinion. Eight of the journalists also said that (shadow) ministers had looked for policy advice from them: (Nick Robinson, *BBC*) '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"?'; (Colin Brown, the *Independent*) I've had Leaders of the Liberal Democrats asking me what should they ask at PMQs. I've had Conservatives asking me what are the points of vulnerability at the moment in the government. And I've had Labour Ministers asking me what do I think the Tories are going to do over X Y and Z, and they all do the same, you know, they all want a little bit of your inside info'.

Political Journalists Centrally Involved in Westminster Politics

Such close and institutionalised relations mean that journalists have multiple, 'insider' roles in Westminster politics that go far beyond simply reporting events. They are a source of information to MPs and ministers about insider politics and are used to circulate front-bench opinions, set political agendas, attack rivals, and influence political debates.

20. *Journalists and intense information exchange and circulation in Westminster*. Because lobby journalists are ever-present and continually talking to politicians they have also become a means of circulating information and opinion amongst politicians themselves. 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. Most of the print journalists spoke of the importance of the journalist 'pack', 'narrative' or 'mood' in influencing both journalism and politics at Westminster: (Ben Brogan, the *Mail*) 'You know, ultimately Westminster is a giant marketplace for political information and political gossip ... there's a constant to and fro of information between journalists and politicians'; (Michael White, *Guardian*) '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?"; (George Jones, *Telegraph*) 'You get feedback from particular sources in the political class. You get feedback from other journalists and politicians ... So this is the sort of political cycle zone.'

21. *Politicians look to journalists to find out what is happening in Westminster Politics.* Conversely, just under a third of politicians said that one major reason they chose to talk to journalists was to find out more about political moods and policy developments, within their own and opposition parties. A third of the political reporters spoke also about MPs and ministers seeking information on some aspect of the political process itself: (Paul Goodman MP) 'I would, of course, also be trying to find out from them [journalists] ... what Government ministers are saying in policy areas, or political areas I'm interested in ... dealing with journalists is perhaps not unanalogous to one of these novels about information-gathering in the world of Cold War. I mean they're trying to find pieces of information from MPs and MPs are trying to find pieces of information from them'; (Sadiq Khan MP) 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 they share information'.

22. *MPs attempt to use media to influence political agenda.* Half of the MPs interviewed said they spoke to the media for the explicit purpose of influencing Parliamentary agendas and government decision-making in some way. Just under half said they attempted to float stories to influence political debate and government policy. The same number said they talked to journalists to push particular views: (Peter Luff MP) 'as a Select Committee Chairman, I'm very conscious of the fact that the single most powerful weapon we have is publicity. Where our reports are reported is crucial. We need to have good relations with the media for that'; (Frank Dobson MP) 'the relationship is very different in opposition. You want them, you need them. If you want to make news, make an impact, run a campaign, you need their support'; (John Redwood MP) 'leaders of the opposition take media very seriously because it's all you've got. You can do it on media campaigns so you work very closely with them and they are very important to us.'

23a. *Government and senior party figures influence political process through media.* However, such activity was most common place 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: (Clare Short MP, former cabinet minister) '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'; (Charles Lewington, Conservative) 'In my case we spent huge amounts of time trying to influence colleagues through the media'.

23b. *Journalists agree on MP/minister use of media to influence politics.* (Paul Routledge, the *Mirror*) 'It [kite-flying] is also used to dominate ones enemies. Ministers get briefed against by other ministers all the time ... It's part of the Mandelsonisation of the party'; (Andrew Grice, the *Independent*) 'If there is a big cabinet discussion coming up, a big disagreement between ministers, lots of briefing goes on. They will often try and bounce the Prime Minister into something, or rubbish their opponents case'.

Multiple Indirect Forms of Media Influence on Political Behaviour

Interviews revealed that news media coverage did have multiple influences on the way politicians thought about and reacted to political agendas, policy and legislation. Few admitted to being personally influenced. However, many believed others, from the public to other MPs, ministers and journalists were affected. This made parties, even at the most senior levels, acutely attuned to, and concerned with, media coverage.

24. *News media as basic political information source and agenda-setter for MPs.* Politicians were asked: 'What are your main sources of information when it comes to informing yourself about, and deciding where you stand on political issues?' News media was the second most mentioned source by all interviewees with four out of every seven listing it. Significantly, it was the single most important source for roughly half the back benchers who listed it. This also found support in another MORI survey (Summer, 2001), when MPs were asked 'which of these sources of information are most useful to you in your work': 59%, the top answer, said 'articles in newspapers or magazines'. For many news media was a starting point for their day and gave clues as to what issues needed to be looked at. A quarter of MPs said that the news, in some way, contributed to setting the political agenda in Parliament for the day. They talked in terms of news highlighting what would be the prominent issues and talking points of MPs, journalists and other parliamentarians. For a smaller group it went further in 'setting the context' or 'framework of interpretation' of an issue: (Danny Alexander MP) 'I'm very interested in political commentary ... it's very important to understand the context in which you're operating because the context shapes a lot of the way people will see what you're doing'; (Sadiq Khan MP) 'Obviously the newspapers are very important to me. I read habitually ... those daily and weekly newspapers and magazines signpost me where to go.'

25. *News influence because MPs believe other MPs and public influenced.* The majority of MPs believed that the media, while not reflecting public opinion, did contribute to public opinion of the parties and individual politicians: (Martin Linton MP) 'if the media can affect public opinion, and politicians have to be sensitive to public opinion, then indirectly they are affected by the media'; (Kevan Jones MP) 'it's other MPs, it's other journalists, it's the political classes in here, and I think it does affect the mood music here, you know what I mean, in terms of the way people think'; (Julia Kirkbride MP) 'you know, the sort of doyens, George Jones in the Telegraph, the Phil Websters and the Mike Whites in the Guardian, you know ... they'd have little confabs, it's like a rabbit warren up there. And yes, on the big moments like that they hunt as a pack and a view is taken.' A number stated that particular columnists and political lobby correspondents could be very influential amongst MPs. A number of different commentators were named without prompting. Certain key political lobby correspondents were taken more notice of and played a more formative role in directing opinion amongst both journalists and politicians.

26. *Journalist influences on policy process.* 20 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. Many journalists agreed: (Polly Toynbee, *Guardian*) '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'; (Danny Alexander MP) 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 ... 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.

27a. *Cabinet concerns over media coverage of policy.* Almost every interviewee, who had served in a cabinet or shadow cabinet since the late 1980s, talked of great media concern when formulating policy. Indeed, for many interviewees policy was all too often developed with headlines in mind. For former Conservative Ministers: (Ann Widdecombe MP) 'We never discussed a policy without discussing the media impact, ever'; (John Whittingdale MP) 'John Major, on the other hand, cared deeply about what the media said and became obsessed with it ... with William [Hague] ... the concern was always how can we get coverage ... that can lead to charges of opportunism, and did clearly, that you are leaping on bandwagons because that's the way to get newspaper coverage.'

27b. *For former Labour Ministers:* (Frank Field MP) 'actually they're [the Blair Government] obsessed by it. It's the number one priority. The number one priority [in 1998-9] was the media coverage because at all costs we had to win a second time ... Never mind about getting reforms through'; (Chris Smith MP) 'I think where the media has an impact, and it has a huge impact, is in relation to the question which is constantly in a minister's mind, is "what is the media going to say about this?"'

28. *Avoidance of party debate in public because of non or negative media coverage.* Several politicians made clear that parties were now keen to avoid public debates on certain issues and were scared of personality-based and party-split type stories. Thus public policy debate has declined: (Tim Collins MP) 'Now we are in a cleft stick as regards the question of public debate ... One, they want independent, objective, unconstrained politicians who can debate freely. Two, they want non-divided, non-split, smoothly functioning parties. Parties look at this second perspective and therefore work hard to cut down on divisions and conflicts'; (Greg Clark MP) 'I don't think there's a terribly strong interest in the media for policy debates you know. Newspapers are about news and policy isn't really news. It's events that are news, so policy comes into the news when the consequences of policy create a news event'.

29. *Journalists focus on personalities, sleaze and splits over policy.* Several journalists acknowledged these points. Experienced journalists know that public discussions of legislation and the details of policy are unlikely to gain publication space or increase readership. Senior news editors and managers strongly discourage it: (Trevor Kavanagh, the *Sun*) 'Circulation actually goes down if there is a lot of political coverage ... At one point I had three memos leaked from Blair's office, I got the scoop of the year, but sales actually went down'; (Polly Toynbee, the *Guardian*) 'I think one of the reasons that ministers have such contempt for the press, quite rightly really, is that what they're doing day after day is hard policy work on things that are interesting and important, that never ever get anywhere near the light of day ... We report nothing of what really happens, what the stuff of Government really is, and what they're really doing and thinking about all the time'; (Colin Brown, the *Independent*) 'Journalists found out that stories with sleaze automatically get into newspapers ... If you've got a long term investigation into, say, the Trident weapon programme, or you've got a Minister getting his leg over with his secretary, you'll make a lot of money out of the second and you'll hardly get anybody to publish the first'.

Media Influences on Specific Public Policy Agendas and Debates

Politicians and journalists were asked how such party media management and journalist news values had influenced specific policy-making areas and pieces of legislation. A range of examples and policy sectors were mentioned. The more common responses are summed up here.

30a. *Emphasising lesser policies with 'strong headline impact'*. Many interviewees were asked about what kinds of issues were more likely to be influenced by media coverage and therefore would be over-emphasised in policy agendas and media relations. For both politicians and journalists the policies most likely to be covered were those with a 'strong headline impact', that were 'emotive', 'sensitive' and had a 'human interest' angle. Legislation on the 2005 Gambling Bill, hand guns, dangerous dogs, immigration and asylum, as well as funding decisions on hospitals, schools and rural railways were some of the issues mentioned.

30b. *Crime and immigration*. Frequently mentioned policy areas, which got more media coverage, and thus encouraged more public policy responses and legislation, were crime and immigration: (David Blunkett MP) 'Street crime, street robbery would be a good example ... And the media picked it up. Once they'd picked it up it took off like a snowball rolling down a hill ... it was a self-fulfilling hot air balloon that took off and it was necessary, therefore, to take absolutely decisive steps to do something about it'; (Philip Webster, the *Times*) 'the Sun would undoubtedly have an impact on the way issues like criminal justice legislation, immigration matters are treated'; (Michael White, the *Guardian*) 'Oh yes, of course yes, they're influenced to go after populist issues ... Crime is an easy one'; (Ann Widdecombe MP) 'Asylum was huge during our time ... I don't think the media actually dictated policy but it did create an atmosphere in which it was felt something had to be addressed, something had to be done about it.'

31a. *Policy neglect or avoidance of public debate because of media*. Interviewees were also asked the reverse question: i.e., what got less media attention and perhaps then fell lower down the policy agenda. Issues mentioned were those that were complex, technical, long-term or chronic. International development, constitutional affairs, energy policy, and slow, emerging crises of debt, pensions and the environment, were the kinds of issue mentioned in this category. Arguably, policy-makers would be less likely to focus on these issues, and, opposition MPs and back benchers would be less likely to be able to raise the issues through news media to encourage political responses: (Peter Riddell, the *Times*) 'on the whole if you mention constitutional issues to a news desk or parliamentary procedure or reform of parliament there's a problem'; (John Whittingdale MP) 'if you look at the reports of committees like Work and Pensions or Constitutional Affairs, they don't get a lot of media attention'; (Austin Mitchell MP) 'And if the media aren't interested it's dead effectively. They're not much interested in issues of international development, environmental issues, debt, world poverty. But if it doesn't get in the newspapers it doesn't strike chords outside'.

31b. *Key public issues and debates actively avoided: Healthcare and the NHS was mentioned several times*. Interestingly, several politicians and journalists, from across the political spectrum, spoke of the lack of public debate about the long term funding and organisation of the NHS and Welfare State. All sides felt that the topic was too politically sensitive and too complex to discuss, because of the fear of negative coverage: (John Maples MP) 'healthcare ... it is absolutely impossible for the Conservatives to launch a discussion about that because you're instantly going towards "oh well the Tories want to privatise the Health Service"'; (Jeremy Corbyn MP) 'I think there's a debate that we're sort of not having about the role of

the welfare state, social welfare and the NHS. The New Labour agenda is essentially based on news management ... What they're not looking at is an underlying agenda which is essentially an undermining of the principle of the welfare state ... and that is a huge change which has gone fairly unnoticed'; (Michael White, the *Guardian*) 'We've never had the proper debate because they're scared of it ... They fight for the NHS but they're up against the Daily Mail's third world NHS campaign which is quite destructive of public attitudes'; (Trevor Kavanagh, the *Sun*) 'this government will not tackle the large bogeys of British politics ... things like the Welfare State or spending on the Health Service'.

31c. *Europe and EU affairs*. European affairs were also mentioned several times: (Angus Robertson MPs) 'European affairs ... Why, when 60% to 70% of legislation emanates from Brussels, do we read next to nothing about anything beyond straight bananas, Peter Mandelson and an annual bust up in the EU fisheries negotiations?'. (Trevor Kavanagh, the *Sun*) 'I suspect that as long as the Sun is against the Euro there will never be a referendum on the issue'; (Andrew Grice, *Independent*) 'And there's no doubt that one key issue in Blair's mind, when deciding a new policy, will be the media climate. No doubt it will be a big factor when it comes to joining the Euro'.

32. *Journalist/Media influences on political appointments and careers*. Several politicians and journalists spoke wearily of the influence of the media 'pack': (Simon Hughes MP) 'The written media hunt in packs – with some honourable exceptions'; (Colin Brown, the *Independent*) 'Now, there's a pack mentality and it's very difficult to stand out from the pack ... and it's a very dangerous thing in politics because we are chewing up and spitting out politicians with great regularity now'. Just under half the politicians asked, including 10 of the 16 (shadow) ministers, stated that journalists and the media had a role to play in the rise and fall of ministers and in leadership contests. 13 journalists also spoke of the role of the reporter network and/or individual journalists in the movement of ministers. 11 had similar views in relation to leadership elections: (Gary Gibbon, *Channel Four News*) '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"; (Julia Kirkbride MP) 'when we had our great leadership crisis back with Iain Duncan-Smith ... the journalists would ask everybody all the time what they thought ... every journo you spoke to, that was the first question they'd ask ... So the journalists could tell and they were very good at reflecting the real mood of the Party.'

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