

‘For Better or Worse’

Tony Blair on Politics and the Media

On June 12, 2007, as part of a series of farewell speeches during his final days as prime minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair spoke on “the challenge of the changing nature of communication on politics and the media” at the Reuters Institute. The following excerpt, lightly edited for clarity, is taken from his published remarks.

I should say some preliminaries at the outset. This is not my response to the latest whacking from bits of the media, it is not a whine about how unfair it all is. As I always say, it is

an immense privilege to do this job and if the worst that happens is harsh media coverage, it is a small price to pay. And anyway, like it or not—and some do and some don't—I have won three elections and I am still standing as I leave office. So this speech is not a complaint, it is an argument.

Also as a result of being at the top of the greasy pole for thirteen years, ten of them as prime minister, my life and my work as prime minister and its interaction with the world of communication I think gives me pretty deep experience, again for better or worse.

Let me also say categorically that a free media is a vital part of a free society. You only need to look at where such a free media is absent to know this truth.

But it is also part of freedom to be able to comment on the media. It has a complete right to be free, and I, like anyone else, have a complete right to speak. My principal reflection however is not about blaming anyone, it is that the relationship between politics, public life, and the media is changing as a result of the changing context of communication in which we all operate. No one is at fault. This change is a fact, but it is my view that the effect of this change is seriously adverse to the way public life is conducted and that we need, at the least, a proper and considered debate about how we manage the future, in which it is in all our interests that the public is properly and accurately informed. They, after all, are the priority and they are not well-served by the current state of affairs.

In the analysis I am about to make I first acknowledge my own complicity. It is also, incidentally, hard for the public to know the facts, even when they are subject to the most minute scrutiny if those facts arise out of issues of profound controversy...

And in none of this also do I ignore the fact that this relationship has always been fraught. From Stanley Baldwin's statement about "power without responsibility being the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages," back to the often extraordinary brutal treatment, if you have ever read it, meted out to Gladstone and Disraeli, through to Harold Wilson's complaints of the 1960s. The relations between politics and the media are and are by necessity difficult. It is as it should be. The question is: is it qualitatively and quantitatively different today? And I think yes.

However, why is that? Because the objective circumstances in which the world of communications operate today are radically altered. The media world, like everything else, is becoming more fragmented, more diverse, and above all, transformed by technology. The main BBC and ITN bulletins used to have audiences of eight, even ten million. Today the average is half that. At the same time, there are rolling 24 hour news programs that cover events as they unfold. In the early 1980s there were three TV stations broadcasting in the UK. Today there are hundreds. In 1995, over 200 TV shows had audiences of over fifteen million. Today there is almost none.

Newspapers fight for a share of a shrinking market. Many are now read online, not the next day. Internet advertising has overtaken newspaper ads, and there are roughly 70 million blogs in existence—so I am told—with around 120,000 being created every day. In particular, younger people will less and less get their news from traditional outlets.

But in addition to that, the forms of communication are merging and interchanging. The BBC website is crucial to the modern BBC. Papers have podcasts and written material on the Web. News is becoming increasingly a free good, provided online without charge. Realistically, these trends [will only] intensify in the years to come.

Now these changes are better known to many of you than to me, and they are obvious. Less obvious is their effect. The news schedule is now 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and it moves in real time. Papers don't give you up-to-date news; that is already out there. They have to break stories, try to lead the schedules, or they give a commentary. And it all happens with outstanding speed. You have to respond to stories also in real time. Frequently, the problem is as much assembling the facts as giving them. Make a mistake and you quickly transfer from drama into crisis.

In the 1960s, believe it or not, the government would sometimes, if there was a serious issue, have a cabinet meeting that would last over two days. It would be laughable to think you could do that now without the heavens falling in before lunch on the first day.

Things also harden within minutes. I mean, you can't let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant.

And I am going to say something that few people in public life will say, but most know is absolutely true. A vast aspect of our jobs today, outside of the really major decisions, as big as anything else, is coping with the media, its sheer scale, weight, and constant hyperactivity. At points it literally overwhelms. Talk to senior people in virtually any walk of life today—business, military, public services, sport, even charities and voluntary organizations—and they will tell you the same. People don't speak about it because in the main they are afraid to, but it is true nonetheless, and those who have been around long enough will also say it has changed significantly in the past years.

The danger, though, is that we then commit the same mistake as the media often do with us—it is the fault of bad people. My point is that it is not the people that have changed, it is the context within which they work. For example, we devote reams of space now to debating why there is so much cynicism about politics in public life, and in this, the politicians are obliged to go into self-flagellation, admitting it is all our fault. Actually, if you don't have a proper press operation nowadays, it is like asking a batsman to face bodyline bowling without pads or headgear. And, believe it or not, most politicians come into public life with a desire to serve and, by and large, try to do the right thing, not the wrong thing....

But my case is not, “isn’t this terrible, let’s all go back to the old days.” It is that there is no point in either blaming the media or indeed ourselves; we are both handling the changing nature of communication and the way it works today. And the sooner we recognize this—that it is about a changing context—the better, because we can then debate a sensible way forward. The reality is that as a result of the changing context in which twenty-first-century communications operate, the media are facing a hugely more intense form of competition than anything they have ever experienced before. They are not actually the masters of this change; they are in many ways the victims.

The result, however, is a media that increasingly, and to a dangerous degree, is driven by *impact*. Impact is what matters; it is all that can distinguish, can rise above the clamor, can get noticed. Impact gives competitive edge. Of course, the accuracy of the story counts, but it is secondary often to impact. It is this necessary devotion to impact that is unraveling standards, driving them down, making the diversity of the media not the strength it should be, but an impulsion towards sensation above all else.

Broadsheets today face the same pressures as tabloids; broadcasters increasingly [face] the same pressure as broadsheets. The audience needs to be arrested, held, and their emotions engaged; something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked.

And the consequences of this are acute.

First, scandal or controversy beats ordinary reporting hands down.... Second, attacking motive is far more potent than attacking judgment. It is not enough for someone to make an error, it has to be venal, conspiratorial.... What creates cynicism is not mistakes, it is allegations of misconduct, but misconduct is what has impact. Third, the fear of missing out means that today’s media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits, but no one dares miss out. Fourth, rather than just report news, even if sensational or controversial, the new [practice makes] commentary on the news as, if not more, important than the news itself. So for example, there will often be as much interpretation of what a politician is saying as there is coverage of them actually saying it. And in the end, what matters is not what they mean, but what they can be taken to mean. This leads to the incredibly frustrating pastime of expending a large amount of energy, rebutting claims about the significance of things said, that bears little or no relation to what was intended. But in turn, this leads to a fifth point, which is the confusion of news and commentary. Comment is a perfectly respectable part of journalism, but it is supposed to be separate. Opinion and fact should be clearly divisible. The truth is, a large part of the media today...elides the two...as a matter of course. In other words, this is not exceptional; it is routine....

And the final consequence of all of this is that it is rare today to find

balance in the media. Things, people, issues, stories, are all black and white. Life's usual grays are almost entirely absent. Some good, some bad, some things going right, some going wrong. These are concepts alien to much of today's reporting. It is a triumph or a disaster: a problem is a crisis; a setback, a policy in tatters; a criticism, a savage attack.

And then, in turn, the nongovernmental organizations and the pundits know that unless they are prepared to go over the top they shouldn't go out at all. Talk to any public service leader, especially for example in the National Health Service or the field of law and order, and they will tell you not that they mind the criticism, but they become totally demoralized by the completely unbalanced nature of it...

Now it used to be...that help was on the horizon. New forms of communication would provide new outlets to bypass the increasingly shrill tenor of the traditional media. In fact, the new forms can be even more pernicious, less balanced, more intent on the latest conspiracy theory multiplied by five.

But here is also the opportunity. At present we are all being dragged by the way media and public life interact. Trust in journalists is not much above that in politicians. Yet there is a market in providing serious, balanced news; there is a desire for impartiality. The way that people get their news may be changing, but the thirst for news being real news is not.

The media of course—understandably, in a way—will fear that any

retreat from impact will mean diminishing sales. But the opposite can be the case. They need to reassert their own selling point in this new communication age, the distinction between news and comment...

It is sometimes said that the media is accountable daily through the choice of readers and viewers, and of course that is true, up to a point. But the reality is that the viewers or readers have no objective yardstick to measure what they are being told. In every other walk of life in our society that exercises power there are external forms of accountability, not least, of course, through the media itself.

So it is true politicians are accountable through the ballot box every few years, but they are also profoundly accountable daily—rightly—through the media, which is why a free press is so important.

I am not in a position to determine this one way or another, but a way needs to be found. I do believe this relationship between public life and the media is now damaged in a manner that requires repair. The damage saps the country's confidence and self-belief, it undermines its assessment of itself and its institutions, and above all, it reduces our capacity to take the right decisions in the right spirit for our future.

So those are my thoughts. I have made the speech, after much hesitation. I know it will be rubbished in certain quarters, but I also know this needed to be said, and so I have said it.