

Media and Democracy

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Introduction

This book was commissioned as a collection of case studies, to follow my first volume of overview essays reappraising bodies of literature concerned with different aspects of media and power.¹ This first volume was reprinted several times and translated into five languages. This prompted me to reconceive this book as a more ambitious project. Eight essays (Chapters 1–8) have been written for it, leaving me with the problem of deciding which of the residue of earlier published essays I should select. The ones that survive the resulting cull include two (Chapters 10 and 11) that disappeared into a black hole of obscurity, virtually unread, in preference to more obvious choices (including one anthologised in four books and another cited in over 200 publications). I thought that I would give these two disregarded essays a second chance.²

Since many readers will dip into this book rather than read it from beginning to end, it may be helpful to provide a brief indication of its contents and identify the threads of argument that run through it. Media and democracy is one of the most intensively ploughed areas in media studies, resulting in a number of good books.³ There seemed no point, therefore, in going over the same ground or even synthesising what has been published, since this latter has been done a number of times – not least in an illuminating summation of media democratic theory that has taken leading scholars over a decade to complete.⁴

However, most books on media and democracy are either theoretical or grounded in the experience of one nation. So my point of departure has been to look concretely at the democratic functioning of the media in different contexts, beginning with America. The design of the American news media system is based on two assumptions. If the media are to be free from government, they have to be organised as a market, not a state, system; and if they are to serve fully democracy, they should be staffed by professionals seeking to be accurate, impartial and informative. The allure of this system, the soft power of its global attraction, is brought out in the opening chapter by contrasting the ideals and achievements of American journalism with the limitations of journalism in other countries, exemplified by cowed journalism in numerous authoritarian states, the fusion of media and political power in Italy and the irresponsibility of tabloid journalism in Britain.

This is followed by a chapter that takes a closer look at American news media. The shining city on the hill turns out to be less luminous when viewed from the inside. There is compelling evidence that American news reporting is, in some contexts, only semi-independent of government. The product of a very unequal

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society, American media tend to legitimate inequality, especially in their coverage of the poor. As the principal vehicle of costly, almost unregulated political advertising, American television also plays a pivotal role in sustaining the money-driven nature of American politics. These links between media and politics in America go largely unnoticed in the standard comparative map of media systems, whose validity is questioned.

The first two chapters thus laud and criticise American journalism. This leads to the third, co-authored, chapter (with Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund and Inka Salovaara-Moring), which compares the democratic performance of news media in the US, Britain, Denmark and Finland. Television in Scandinavian countries pays more attention to political and international news than does American television, which is one reason why Scandinavians are much better informed about these topics than Americans (with the British falling in between). Television in Denmark and Finland (and, to a lesser extent, Britain) also broadcasts more news at peak times than in America. This encourages greater inadvertent viewing of the news, contributing to a smaller knowledge gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. In short, Europeans are better informed about politics and international affairs partly because they are better briefed about these topics by their public-service television systems than are Americans by their more consumer-orientated television system (though there are additional, more important societal reasons as well).

The analysis of Chapter 3 can be challenged on the grounds that it is based on the conventional assumption that 'hard news' supports political knowledge. But surely soft news has a political dimension, once it is acknowledged that 'the personal is political'? More generally, the central argument mobilised in Chapter 3 – that hard news is being crowded out by entertainment in market-driven media – seems blind to the political meanings embedded in entertainment, which researchers in cultural and film studies take almost for granted.

Chapter 4 acknowledges the full force of the argument that media entertainment connects to the democratic life of society. It explores the way in which film and TV drama facilitate a debate about social values that underpin politics; enable an exploration of social identity (closely linked to a sense of self- and group interest central to politics); offer contrasting interpretations of society; and contribute to a normative debate about our common social processes – about how they are and how they should be. Thus, the television series *24* provided a catalyst for a national debate in the US about whether state torture was acceptable, while *Sex and the City* supported a collective conversation about the role and expectations of women at a time of rapid transition in gender relations. But although entertainment fuels democratic debate, a distinction needs to be made between fiction and journalism. This is because citizens need to be informed about important, real-life actions taken by their government – especially if this entails visiting death on another country. That more than a third of Americans thought in 2006 that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or a major programme for developing them at the time of the 2003 invasion, or that nearly half believed that Iraq was heavily implicated in the September 11 attacks, is an indictment of a society rendered politically under-informed by its dependence on a diet of entertainment. A democracy needs to be properly briefed to be effectively self-governing.

If media democratic theory needs to take account of the rise of mass entertainment, another necessary adjustment is to come to terms with increased globalisation. Global economic forces are rendering national government less effective than it used to be, and are in this sense diminishing democratic power. This is leading to attempts to build a multi-tiered system of governance, from the nation state upwards, which is seeking in effect to repair democracy in a global age. The evolution of the news media – still very heavily centred on the nation – is lagging behind this transition and making democratic repair more difficult.

Much theorising about the democratic role of the media is conceived solely in terms of serving the needs of the individual voter. But democracy consists not just of government and citizens, but also of a large number of intermediate organisations from political parties to public-interest groups. Attention needs to be given to how media systems should best support this infrastructure of democracy. This leads logically, it is argued, to recognising that different kinds of journalism – not just the disinterested, objective, factual model upheld in American journalism schools – can usefully contribute different things to the functioning of democracy.

Media and technology is the second node of this book. One of the hopes vested in the Internet is that it is forging a ‘global public sphere’ empowering international citizenry. Chapter 5, co-authored with Tamara Witschge, explores this theme by investigating a distinguished e-zine, *openDemocracy*, which gained an international audience in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The development of this web-based magazine illustrates the ways in which the Internet can facilitate innovative journalism. But it also points to the way in which the web is constrained by its context and time. Most of *openDemocracy*'s contributors came from the same parts of the world because they shared the same language. Contributors were overwhelmingly men, reflecting the cultural inheritance of unequal gender participation in political life. And they were mostly from elite backgrounds, because knowledge, fluency and time are unequally distributed in the external world, though this was exacerbated by the editorial values of the magazine. And despite gaining a substantial audience (approaching half a million visits a month at its peak), the e-zine failed to generate any significant revenue. The absence of a substantial stream of advertising and subscription revenue is limiting the development of independent web-based international journalism and its capacity to build genuinely global networks of communication (without some form of subsidy).

Chapter 6 looks at what was foretold in relation to British cable television, interactive digital television, community television and the dotcom boom – and what actually transpired. Forecasts were repeatedly, wildly wrong. In most cases, they originated from the business interests promoting new technological applications, were corroborated by senior politicians and admired experts and amplified by gullible media. These forecasts were also given credence because they accorded with a widely shared technology-centred perspective little influenced by economics and sociology.

An examination of past foretelling is followed, in Chapter 7, by a look at current predictions. There are four main – and mostly inconsistent – forecasts for the future of journalism: underlying continuity in a well-managed process of transition; a crisis of journalism that threatens democracy; a liberating Schumpeterian purge;

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and a renaissance of journalism based on its reinvention. Each of these forecasts is for different reasons unconvincing. What seems instead to be happening is that the Internet is contributing to the decline and increased uniformity of old media journalism. This is not being offset adequately by new web-based start-ups because, in most cases, these have been unable to generate sufficient revenue to be self-supporting. The underlying problem is that journalism as a whole – online and offline – is being partly decoupled from advertising funding.

The third node of the book is concerned with media history. Media history has not made the impact on the interdisciplinary field of media studies that it should have. This is partly because media historians tend to address only themselves and subdivide media history by medium and period. As a consequence, the potential of media history to illuminate the nature of the broad connections between media development and societal change has tended to be lost. For this reason, I had earlier attempted to summarise alternative interpretations of the role of the media in the making of modern British society (with clear parallels to other economically developed countries) as a way of illustrating how history provides a gateway to understanding the present.⁵ In Chapter 8, I return to this topic by looking at recent research. The liberal interpretation – celebrating the winning of media freedom and public empowerment, linked to the democratisation of the political system – is beginning to be modified in response to radical criticism. The feminist interpretation, which argues that the development of the media empowered men at the expense of women, is responding to revisionists within its own ranks who emphasise that the media changed in response to the advance of women. The radical tradition, which views the development of the media in terms of containing working-class advance and consolidating elite domination, is urged to take account of reformist success. The anthropological interpretation centred on the role of the media in nation building is now turning to the role of the media in sustaining ‘sub-national’ consciousness. The libertarian interpretation charting the culture wars between moral traditionalists and liberals in the context of de-Christianisation indicates that liberals in Britain have been gaining the upper hand (though the outcome is clearly very different in some other countries). The populist interpretation that views the increased commercialisation of the media as a means of emancipation from a cultural elite, in a celebratory account of the growth of consumerism, remains influential, though perhaps not the force that it was. By contrast, the technological determinist interpretation, which sees successive new media as transforming the culture, social relations and sensibility of the age, has received a boost from the recent boom in Internet studies.⁶

The next two chapters focus on particular aspects of press history that have a wider resonance. The standard interpretation argues that the British press became free when it ceased to be subject to punitive taxation in the mid-nineteenth century and hails the politicians who campaigned for this as freedom fighters (albeit also with vested interests). Chapter 9 contests this by examining what these ‘freedom fighters’ actually said at the time. It shows that a major concern was to lower the price of newspapers and expand the press as a way of indoctrinating the lower orders. They were convinced that their version of enlightenment would prevail and, in some instances, that well-funded papers controlled by businesspeople and

favoured by advertisers would promote moderation. Furthermore, it is argued, they were right, partly because the shift from craft to high-cost industrial production of the press, and increased dependence on advertising, made radical journalism more difficult.

The next chapter examines the impact of advertising on the press during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. It argues that the rise of advertising agencies as intermediaries, the development of evidence-based selection of advertising media and the rising incomes and advertising worth of workers all made it easier for radical journalism to make a breakthrough in the first half of the twentieth century. This said, advertising spending across newspapers was still very unequal, save for a brief period of newsprint rationing, because some readers had more money to spend than others, generated a higher advertising bounty and were worth more to publishers to recruit. This distorted the structure of the press, and its editorial strategies, in ways that disadvantaged the left. But this outcome came about in an unsought way and was the product of an impersonal economic process rather than of political discrimination.

In advancing this argument, I was influenced at the time by contending instrumentalist and structuralist interpretations of the state in critical political theory, and advanced in effect a structuralist interpretation of the influence of advertising on the press. But in the course of researching this essay, I became fascinated by the way in which the new business disciplines of market research and advertising media planning were developed by a motley but clever group of people. They changed the operation of the market by the way in which they reinterpreted it, in the process influencing the development of the press. Essentially the same process was at work when new ways of conceptualising and measuring the television audience, and of segmenting the market, in later twentieth-century America encouraged the growth of specialist television channels.⁷ These arguments accord with a new stress on the cultural construction of markets that is being developed in the sociology of the economy.⁸

The last node of the book is concerned with media and culture. Chapter 11 shows that book reviews in the British national press centre on literary fiction, history, biography, literary studies and politics. This excludes some books that are popular bestsellers and some that are important (in particular those concerned with science and social science). This idiosyncratic selection reflects the educational backgrounds of books editors, most of whom studied history or English at elite universities. Their predilections are reinforced by editorial tradition, their skewed teams of book reviewers and their social networks. Publishing executives are mostly content to anticipate books editors' preferences rather than to challenge them. The press can thus be viewed as a custodian of cultural tradition that entrenches a humanities domination of public and cultural life, while downgrading other disciplines as falling outside the core curriculum of what 'informed' people ought to know about.⁹ Little has changed since this research was done. More paperbacks are reviewed, but the neglect of science has become even more pronounced.

The last chapter reviews the development of British media and cultural studies during the last twenty-five years. The conventional way in which researchers narrate the field to themselves is to identify an inner logic in which gaps are identified and

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new insights are recognised, producing a succession of enlightening ‘turns’ to a new, improved understanding. This leaves out the way in which changes in the wider context of society influence the development of research. While some contextual influences have been positive, the ascendancy of neo-liberalism has rendered a once radical field of research less critical. Now that this ascendancy is contested, after the 2008 crash, perhaps this will change.

All previously published essays have been revised for publication here. My aim has been to make them accessible to a first-year undergraduate. Two chapters (9 and 10) have each been cut by a third to fit the publisher’s length requirements.

My thanks go to Stanford University, which awarded me a Visiting McClatchy Professorship, Pennsylvania University, which provided me with a visiting Annenberg-endowed post, and the Annenberg Press Commission, which invited me to join its ranks (and produced an inquest volume on the American media).¹⁰ This prompted me to learn more about the American media and embark on comparative survey research – something reflected in the first third of this book.

My thanks go also to the Leverhulme Trust, which awarded me and my colleagues a grant of £1.25 million to investigate new media. Early fruits of this are presented in the middle part of this book. As part of this, I would like to express my thanks to Joanna Redden, who won a Leverhulme scholarship from a crowded field and provided research assistance for Chapters 2, 6 and 7. My thanks go also to Justin Schlosberg, who rendered consistent the presentation of footnotes. All other acknowledgements are gratefully expressed at the beginning of chapters.

1 Shining city on a hill

The United States is the principal originator and exporter of a great media experiment. Its starting point is that the media should be organised as a free-market system on the grounds that any form of public ownership or legal regulation (beyond the barest minimum) endangers media freedom. However, this approach differs from neo-liberalism in that it also argues that the free market can have debilitating effects on the media. Its solution to this double bind – the need to have a free market and to negate its adverse effects without involving the state – is to develop a tradition of professionalism among journalists. In this way, the media can remain free, yet serve the people.

This general thesis is set out in the Hutchins Commission report, still perhaps the most cogent and elegant report on media policy ever published in the English language.¹ The report directly confronts First Amendment fundamentalism by arguing that the aim of public media policy should not be *confined* to securing media freedom from government control. The media have also a duty, it argues, to serve the public good – something that cannot be fulfilled automatically through the free play of the market. This is because the effort to attract the largest audience can sometimes undermine accuracy and encourage a preoccupation with the exceptional rather than the representative, the sensational rather than the significant. Free-market processes have also given rise to plutocratic ownership of newspapers and their concentration into chains, creating the potential for abuse.

Yet, the report recoils from the idea of advocating ‘more laws and government action’² since this poses a threat to media freedom. What, then, should be done? The answer, according to the report, is to promote an overriding commitment to the common good among media controllers and staff, foster ‘professional ideals and attitudes’³ and a tradition of ‘competence, independence and effectiveness’.⁴ In short, the media can be best improved not through laws but through leadership and the entrenchment of a public-interest culture in its staff.

The Hutchins report was written by leading American public intellectuals and published in 1947. It came out of a reform movement that had not only public support but perhaps more importantly the backing of major media controllers,⁵ leading journalists and also journalism educators.⁶ This movement had also a long history extending back to the nineteenth century. And its championship of journalistic autonomy, standards and public service was *anchored* by adherence to the codes and procedures of ‘objective’ reporting. This demanded ‘detachment, nonpartisanship, inverted pyramid writing, reverence for facts and balance’.⁷

This reformist tradition was also nurtured by the oligopolistic structure of the American media. During the reformist 'golden age', in the third quarter of the twentieth century, just three networks dominated television, two news magazines loomed large in the underdeveloped national printed press and most metropolitan dailies enjoyed a local monopoly. It was much easier to be high-minded when competition was limited and profitability was assured by a rising volume of advertising.

This high tide of professional media reformism is memorialised in Herbert Gans' classic ethnography of the three commercial TV networks and the two principal news magazines during the 1960s and 1970s. The growth of conglomerate media ownership had resulted, he argued, in the devolution of shareholder power to managers, who delegated, in turn, considerable decision-making authority to journalists. This was, he argued, partly an operational consequence of the specialisation of function within news organisations, but it was also a response to the high degree of professional consciousness among journalists. 'Delegation of power', Herbert Gans writes, 'also takes place because the news organisation consists of professionals who insist on individual autonomy'.⁸ Thus while large business corporations were 'nominal managers' of leading media, the people working in them were effectively in control and did not shrink from carrying news detrimental to their parent companies' interests.⁹ Managerial pressure to make profits was also offset by journalists' commitment to professional goals. This could result in journalists deliberately shunning information about audience preferences, particularly if they feared that viewers and readers are 'not particularly interested in the news they now receive'.¹⁰

Gans' overall conclusion was thus that America's flagship media were strongly influenced by the professional values of their staff and their desire for autonomy. It now reads as an elegiac rendering of how America's top media used to be.

Responsible media capitalism

This influential account acknowledged that news media were influenced by the underlying belief systems of society and recognised the subtle ways in which journalistic autonomy was in fact constrained. The book is far from being uncritical. Yet, it failed to engage fully with the way in which the underlying conservatism of American society left a gelatinous imprint on American journalism. This is something to which we shall return in the next chapter.

American iconoclasts have also pointed to the limitations of the professional reformist tradition. Thus, some media historians argue that the development of a commitment to objectivity masked a pragmatic, marketing concern to appeal to readers with different politics; the growing stress on factuality reflected the naïve empiricism of high modernism; and the high-mindedness of this reformist tradition perhaps cloaked, at some level, an accommodation to power.¹¹ Similarly, a number of media sociologists argue that the procedures of 'objective reporting' privileged the powerful in sourcing and framing the news; and that balancing authorities' truth claims became a sorry substitute for truth-seeking. These limitations were a response, it is argued, to deadline pressure, lack of relevant expertise and sometimes concern to avoid a running battle with authority.¹²

While all these criticisms have some validity, they should not obscure the enormous achievements of the American experiment. In particular, the standard leftwing accusation that American journalism reproduces a news script written by established authority fails to register the multiple conditions in which this is not true.¹³ When powerful actors have transgressed shared norms, when elite groups have strongly differed with each other or when there has been an effectively organised popular mobilisation of dissent (as in the civil rights movement), the American media have hosted or expressed strong criticism of established power.

The classic illustration of this is the 1972–4 Watergate scandal.¹⁴ In this often-narrated saga, a group of men linked to the re-election campaign for President Nixon illegally broke into the National Democratic headquarters in the Watergate complex, and were caught in the act. Subsequent investigations revealed the high-level connections of those involved, and the attempt of President Nixon and his closest advisers to cover this up. Leading media, most notably the *Washington Post*, played a significant part in this disclosure. The ensuing outcry generated pressure for President Nixon's forced resignation in 1974 and paved the way for the prosecution and imprisonment of a number of his senior aides.

Of course, press revelations did not occur in a vacuum. They were fuelled by leaks, press releases, official investigations and public protests from a variety of powerful actors – a judge, a Deputy Director of the FBI, federal prosecutors, a powerful Senate committee, an Attorney and Deputy Attorney General, among others. Political insiders within the American establishment were especially important in signifying Watergate as being part of a bigger problem – the systematic abuse of government authority – in the immediate aftermath of Nixon's landslide 1972 re-election, when the press seemed ready to downgrade Watergate as a 'sour grapes' Democratic Party issue. But none of this should detract from the record of professionally orientated journalists in tenaciously seeking and publishing revelations about Watergate, contributing to the downfall of the most powerful man in the world.

American local television could also mount exemplary investigations during this reformist professional era. This is perhaps best illustrated by a remarkable series of reports, under the title 'Beating Justice', broadcast by the NBC affiliate in Chicago, Channel 5, in 1983.¹⁵ Their origin lay in a conversation between a recently arrived reporter, Peter Karl, and a local lawyer who complained that the police had thrust an electric cattle prod down his client's throat and applied it to his genitals. Shocked, the reporter dug further and discovered, with his colleagues (and, crucially, with the help of concerned lawyers and hospital staff) a pattern of systematic abuse in which the same police officers were repeatedly involved in beating up people, most of whom were black. The series reported extreme levels of violence, including the transformation of a once healthy 21-year-old man into a quadriplegic following a short ride in a police 'paddy' wagon. Nothing effective was being done, the TV series suggested, to supervise an out-of-control group of Chicago police officers, even though the City of Chicago had been forced to pay out, over five years, some \$5 million to settle (and hush up) police brutality complaints.

Perhaps the most admirable thing about this series is how much investment the local TV station was *then* willing to commit to serious, investigative journalism. It

assigned a producer, assistant producer, a reporter (also working on other stories) and a group of three (changing) student interns to investigate police brutality for *six months*. The names of police officers repeatedly accused of brutality, as well as relevant witnesses, were identified by painstakingly combing federal and county court records and even arrest logs. The editorial budget was generous, with a camera crew spending no less than fifteen evenings in an unmarked van in a vain attempt to capture 'live' a police beating.

Chicago's Channel 5 also backed the investigation with its most precious resource – airtime. It ran the 'Beating Justice' series of news reports on five consecutive evenings on its ten o'clock local news, and repeated an expanded version of each item the next day on the late afternoon local newscast. This enabled a detailed and fully documented presentation of its evidence of wrongdoing. The prominence given to the news reports also helped to ensure that they influenced the political process. Congressman Harold Washington capitalised on their impact in his 1983 mayoral election campaign, promising police reform and mounting a sensational press conference in which he featured fifty alleged victims of police brutality. Washington was elected as the first black Mayor of Chicago. Under his short-lived regime (cut short by his early death), the police superintendent, Richard Brzeczek, was forced to resign, and internal supervision and control of the police was tightened. However, the police commander of the notorious 'midnight crew' was not fired until 1993.¹⁶

Even when the professional power of journalists was weakened during the subsequent period, for reasons that we will come to, an impressive legacy lingered on. A professional culture had been created; talented people had been recruited to journalism and, in the upper reaches, American news media had enormous staffs and budgets. This could still result in remarkable journalism, something that will be illustrated by an unsung series of articles that appeared in the *New York Times* in 2005. Unlike the exceptional 'Beating Justice' series that garnered numerous awards, or the Watergate revelations that were immortalised in a celebrated film,¹⁷ this series attracted little acclaim. But it nevertheless exemplifies the industry, intelligence and public purpose of well-resourced American journalism, even during its period of decline.

In February and March 2005, the *New York Times* published three articles, written by Paul von Zielbauer, under the general title 'Harsh Health'.¹⁸ The first of these presented a Dickensian chronicle of poor medical care in New York State prisons, leading to avoidable deaths. The second article centred on neglect of mentally ill prisoners leading to a spike of suicides, and the third concentrated on failures of care in juvenile detention centres.

The articles were memorable partly because they provided dramatic human-interest cameos. One inmate, Brian Tetrault, had his medication drastically reduced on admission to prison. Over the next ten days, he slid into a stupor, soaked in his own sweat and urine. Dismissed as a fake (one prison nurse noted tartly that Tetrault 'continues to be manipulative'), he died on the tenth day. His records were then doctored to make it appear that he had been released before dying.

Another inmate, Carina Montes, was admitted to gaol after a long history of mental illness and a suicide attempt as early as thirteen years old. Her records went

missing, and she never saw a psychiatrist in her five months in gaol. Despite clear warning signals that were ignored, she hanged herself – joining what inmates call, with black humour, the other ‘hang-ups’.

Tiffany S., aged fourteen, was another troubled inmate. She had been removed from her drug-addicted parents at the age of three, and moved again when her sister was sexually molested by her brother. She had a long history of suicide threats and psychological disorder, and had been given powerful medication by her hospital. When she was admitted to a detention centre after a minor infringement, this medication was stopped by the doctor and replaced by a drug for hyperactivity. The doctor, responsible for health care in nineteen juvenile centres, had been widely criticised for replacing expensive drugs with cheaper, inappropriate prescriptions. Tiffany S. went into sharp decline, started hallucinating and behaved in a strange and distressed way. At this point a redoubtable family court judge, Paula Hepner, stepped in and ordered that Tiffany receive proper medical treatment.

At the centre of the problem, argued the three articles, was Prison Hospital Services, the leading company in the \$2 billion prison health-care industry. It had been found officially wanting in relation to 23 recent inmate deaths. A third of its full-time psychiatric positions were unfilled; fourteen of its doctors had state or federal disciplinary records. It had a controversial record not merely in New York State but in other parts of the United States, where its failures had been repeatedly criticised.

However, the article series transcended the standard narrative of investigative journalism that features wrongdoers doing wrong (with the simplifying implication that evil must be confounded). While pointing an accusing finger at Prison Health Services, and some of its employees, it also offered an intelligent, contextualising account. Prison health care has always been beset with difficulties, because numerous inmates have mental health or addiction problems, making them both difficult and vulnerable. Prison health is unglamorous work, making good staff difficult to recruit and retain. Above all, the series emphasised, there has also been a sustained drive to limit spending on prisons. Forty per cent of inmate health care in the United States is contracted to private companies. Competitive underbidding to secure contracts has led to economies and skeletal staffs, leading to mismanagement and neglect. Little information about prison health care is publicly available, and it is not a topic that people are disposed to worry about. In this situation, ‘businesses with the most dubious track records can survive, and thrive’. But the ultimate responsibility, the articles suggested, lies with the wider community, which wants to save money. This uncomfortable conclusion was rammed home explicitly by an editorial arguing that ‘the root problem is that the country has tacitly decided to starve the prison system of medical care’.¹⁹

The series was triggered in 2003 when Paul von Zielbauer, then a specialist reporter covering local prisons and gaols on the metropolitan desk of the *New York Times*, noticed that there had been six suicides, in as many months, in one prison and decided to check out Prison Hospital Services, responsible for health care in the prison.²⁰ He filed Freedom of Information Act requests for reports of all deaths in gaols for which the company had a contract in New York State and found that it was repeatedly criticised. This led subsequently to a year-long investigation, which

included a trawl through the company's record in other states and thirty interviews with current and former prison health employees, as well as examining numerous court and regulatory agency reports.

What made the series good, apart from the evident ability of Zielbauer (who subsequently wrote memorable articles about the abuse of power in post-Saddam Iraq), were three things. First, the *New York Times* committed significant resources to the investigative project, not only assigning Zielbauer for an extended period, but also Joseph Plambeck to assist him with research and reporting. It also gave prominence to the series: the opening article, for example, was the joint lead story on the first page even though it was not reporting yesterday's news. The second thing that lifted the series was that it was able to draw upon the work of the democratic state in investigating itself: key sources for the series were the sharply critical reports of regulatory authorities, both inside and outside New York State, and also court cases. This documented record helped to build up a compelling picture of a bad situation in need of reform. The third thing that made the series impressive was its straining to achieve balance. Prison Health Services was rightly given the opportunity to defend itself, and its record was contextualised in a way that made for critical understanding rather than facile indignation.

But while exemplary, the series also had defects characteristic of American prestige journalism. Its central weakness was that it was excessively over-long, with the three articles running respectively to 8,624, 6,510 and 3,020 words. It was also artlessly presented, with infrequent subheadings, mostly dull pictures and, in the case of the third article, a dire headline ('A spotty record of health care at juvenile sites in New York'). However, the articles themselves were very skilfully written. They alternated dramatic human-interest stories with analysis, with the reporter enlisting the horror engendered by individual tragedies to motivate the reader to find out more about what was going wrong. The series also shrewdly anticipated reader resistance, not least by concentrating attention on sympathetic inmates, some with minor infractions, with whom sceptical readers of the *New York Times* might be more disposed to care about.

Thus, these three articles – despite their flaws – are a testament to the disciplined moral passion, hard work and intelligence of good American journalism. They were enabled by the enormous resources of a paper,²¹ stuffed with advertising generated by a wealthy readership in one of the richest places in the world. And all these assets were deployed in an attempt to protect one of the most despised pariah-groups in the community – gaoled felons – in a country then without universal health care.²² It is journalism like this that explains why the American model of responsible media capitalism has admirers around the world.

Shining city on a hill

The three examples of American journalism that have just been featured are all exposés of the abuse of official power by, respectively, the US President, police and prison administration. The robust independence of this journalism contrasts with the overt ways in which the media are still controlled in most parts of the world.

The principal way control is exercised is through repressive legislation. For example, in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, the law provides for a maximum of seven years' imprisonment for the publication of (allegedly) 'false' stories that are likely to cause 'fear, alarm or despondency among the public'.²³ Still more restrictive legislation exists in Saudi Arabia, resulting in the lengthy imprisonment of the Saudi Arabian journalist Saleh Al-Harith for phoning through news in April 2000 to al-Jazeera TV that there had been clashes between the police and the Ismaeli minority in Nijran.²⁴ Repressive laws also enable the banning of troublesome publications, as in Indonesia in 1994, when three leading weeklies were closed down by official fiat.²⁵

Second, control can be exerted through public ownership, licensing and regulation of the media. In most authoritarian states, from Albania to Morocco, publicly owned television follows the official line of the government.²⁶ An effective way of muzzling commercial television has been to allocate licensed franchises to allies of the government and governing party or coalition. For example, this is what happened in much of Eastern Europe, following the collapse of communism.²⁷ Most restrictive regimes, from China to Syria, also require internet service providers, licensed within their jurisdictions, to filter out critical or dissident websites.²⁸ Some, as in Saudi Arabia, seek to jam 'undesirable' TV broadcasts from abroad.²⁹ Overlying this system of regulatory control can be the routine issuing of editorial guidelines to the media. For example, the Chinese government, headed by Deng Xiaoping, instructed that there should be no media debate about whether the introduction of pro-market reform policies endangered social relations. This had the desired effect of marginalising leftwing criticism and restricting the reporting of grassroots protests in the immediate post-1989 period.³⁰

Third, control can be exercised through a second party – in particular, the owners of private media – operating in collusion with government. Throughout Latin America, there was an informal coalition between the principal media conglomerates and the dictatorships,³¹ as there was also in pre-democratic Taiwan³² and South Korea.³³ These partnerships were founded primarily on shared interests and outlooks: a common desire to defeat communism/terrorism, maintain order and stability and sustain free enterprise. But narrowly instrumental pragmatism on the part of media controllers can also play a part in securing compliant media. Thus, the desire of press owners to expand their wider commercial interests in mainland China, with the approval of the Beijing government, was a significant factor in the increased taming of the Hong Kong press in the post-1997 period.³⁴ More generally, the flow of advertising tends to be politicised in authoritarian regimes. Thus, throughout the Middle East, commercial advertising is often withheld from media that have lost favour with the government,³⁵ a recurring problem for the pan-Arab TV enterprise, al-Jazeera.³⁶

Fourth, media can also be intimidated through vigilantism. Especially in countries where crime is highly organised and has links to the state, and where the rule of law is weak, journalists are vulnerable to physical intimidation. In Russia, for example, outspoken media workers can be exposed to an escalating scale of violence, beginning with a threatening phone call and progressing to systematic beating up, arson attack and assassination. According to Olessia Koltsova, it is often difficult to distinguish analytically between state and non-state agents of violence in Russia because the two tend to overlap.³⁷

Lastly, an indirect system of control can be established through the invisible threads of domination. While all governments seek to ‘manage’ their media through public relations and other means, this is more intimidating in authoritarian than in non-authoritarian societies. This distinction is perhaps best exemplified by Singapore’s authoritarian democracy, where the media are not controlled through formal censorship and are in a formal sense ‘free’, yet are strongly subordinated to government.³⁸ This is achieved through an all-encompassing hegemony within this small city state. An integrated elite monopolises political power through its control of the People’s Action Party, which has won every election since national independence in 1965, and through annual licensing of civil-society organisations by the state. The ruling elite also dominates local businesses. Above all, it enjoys an almost unchallenged cultural ascendancy, through popular acceptance of its governing ideology of national development, Asian values and ethnic harmony, through its control of public institutions (including the educational system) and through the prestige it has garnered as a consequence of Singapore’s remarkable economic success. For an editor to incur the wrath of the Singaporean government, in the context of a strongly authoritarian, conformist culture, requires courage and independence of a different order from that required in an open, pluralistic society.

So from the vantage point of numerous countries around the world, the independence of American media from government control, and the fearless way in which American journalists are able to criticise authority, is a source of admiration and inspiration. American media – viewed from a distance – seem like a shining city on a hill.

Fact-checking responsibility

It is not only in countries lacking free media that American media reformism commands respect. The fact-checking responsibility of American journalism, its commitment to reporting important news, even its tendency towards bland worthiness, can seem a refreshing contrast to what is available in some other countries. This is especially true in countries with a tradition of irresponsible tabloid journalism.

Few countries have a more irresponsible tabloid press than Britain. It is unusual in having a dominant national press, with ten competing daily newspapers. Five of these are strongly orientated towards the mass market because they derive the greater part of their income from sales. They are also locked into a Darwinian struggle for survival because popular newspaper sales have been in decline since the late 1950s and are now almost in freefall. There is little counterweight to this commercial pressure, since British tabloids are dominated by an entertainment-orientated rather than professional staff culture.³⁹

British tabloids have responded to their deteriorating economic situation by searching with increasing urgency for news that grabs readers’ attention. One time-honoured way of achieving this is to find stories that make readers angry. As a memo to *Sunday Express* journalists enjoined in 2003, ‘we must make the readers cross’.⁴⁰ This strategy led to a spate of anti-immigrant stories during the 2000s, when anti-immigrant attitudes became more widespread. However, tabloid demand for these stories outstripped supply, leading not just to distortion but outright invention.

Thus, in 2003, the tabloid press ran a number of stories about immigrant eating habits. Immigrants were reported to be eating donkeys, guzzling fish ('Now They Are Eating Our Fish!')⁴¹ and devouring swans. This last story connected to a national taboo because swans are a symbol of British heritage, protected by law from Norman times. To eat swans was therefore to invite strong disapproval. The story was judged to be so important that the *Sun* (July 4, 2003) cleared its front page to reveal that 'Callous asylum seekers are barbecuing the Queen's swans', under the banner headline, 'SWAN BAKE'. 'East European poachers', the paper reported, 'lure the protected Royal birds into baited traps, an official Metropolitan Police Report says.' Its continuation story inside the paper recorded unambiguously: 'Police swooped on a gang of East Europeans and caught them red-handed about to cook a pair of swans.'

Although the story was well judged to raise readers' blood pressure, it had one demerit. It was not true. There was in fact no Metropolitan Police report about East Europeans eating swans, merely an internal, one-page memo clarifying the nature of the law in relation to poaching. There were no police arrests of any immigrant 'gang' laying traps for or barbecuing swans.⁴² The *Sun*, concluded the official Press Complaints Commission, 'was unable to provide any evidence for the story'.⁴³

In a similar vein, the *Daily Express* (July 27, 2005) revealed on its front page that 'Bombers are all sponging asylum seekers', a reference to bombers who had attempted to set off bombs in London on July 21. Although calculated to produce outrage, the accusation was inaccurate – as subsequent investigation revealed.⁴⁴ Still, it made a good cue to the poll, published in the same issue, inviting readers to answer the question: 'Should all asylum seekers now be turned back?'

If one attention-seeking strategy is to make readers indignant, another is to make them scared. This is typified by a campaign led by the *Daily Mail* and *Sun* – Britain's two best-selling dailies – alerting readers to the alleged dangers of the 'three-in-one' mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccine. The trigger for the campaign was a press conference, in 1998, in which Dr Andrew Wakefield, the co-author of a medical article, suggested that it was possible that the triple vaccine could cause bowel disorder, leading to autism.⁴⁵ The article was methodologically weak, being based on just twelve, non-randomly selected subjects, and did not even claim to have demonstrated the existence of a connection between the triple vaccine and autism. It was subsequently disowned by the journal which published it.⁴⁶ Dr Wakefield was censured in 2010 for, among other things, failing to declare a financial interest in the outcome of his research (which received funding from litigants against the vaccine),⁴⁷ and was struck off the British General Medical Council register. His suggestion that the MMR jab was hazardous was also refuted by major, scientifically conducted studies in the US, Japan and Finland, as well as research elsewhere.⁴⁸

But this did not prevent leading British tabloid papers from championing an unsubstantiated, maverick view. It was, after all, a story guaranteed to win the attention of parents, and grandparents, of young children. At the height of the MMR scare, in January 2001, the *Sun* published an anxiety-inducing article about the vaccine, on average, every other day for the entire month.⁴⁹ This is typified by its report that 'anguished mother Mary Robinson' is 'convinced' that the MMR jab

'caused autism in four of her kids and behaviour problems in another'.⁵⁰ The article offered no medical support to back up Mary Robinson's conviction, but quoted her as saying that 'they withdraw a hairdryer if there is a problem – why aren't they withdrawing this drug' (by which she meant the MMR vaccine). Celebrities were also mobilised in the cause. 'TV star Carol Vorderman led calls for a safe measles jab last night', reported the *Sun*, adding that the *Countdown* star had 'talked to many people' with children who had been damaged by the MMR vaccine.⁵¹

The problem with these unqualified diagnoses is that autism often becomes apparent at around the age of two, when children are given the first dose of the triple MMR vaccine. This is coincidental, not causally connected. But leading British tabloids gave the impression that to allow one's children to receive the triple vaccine was to play Russian roulette with their health. This view was seemingly legitimated when the prime minister, Tony Blair, declined to say in 2002 whether his youngest son, Leo, had received the vaccine. This gave the story a new lease of life, only for it to begin to peter out in 2003 – some five years after the initial scare.

However, the damage had been done. There was a marked decrease in those taking the MMR vaccine in 1998 that was only partly reversed from 2004 onwards.⁵² Even in 2009, the MMR uptake had not recovered to the pre-scare level before 1998.⁵³ There were also enormous variations of take-up, with London remaining a black spot. This increased children's exposure to illness, and reduced collective 'herd' immunity, with the result that cases of measles increased from 2001 onwards and were still rising in 2009.⁵⁴ Whereas there were only 70 reported cases of measles in England and Wales in 2001, this had risen to 1,143 by 2009.⁵⁵ Measles can give rise to serious complications, including encephalitis, brain damage and even death (with one British child dying in 2005). The MMR story sold newspapers: it also revived an avoidable disease.

The British press is the least trusted in Western Europe because of the excesses of its tabloid newspapers.⁵⁶ But tabloid excess is to be found elsewhere, from Germany to Hong Kong. Viewed from these countries, the professional orientation of mainstream American journalists – their reluctance to lace stories with artificial flavouring and additives, their general adherence to journalistic ethics and their loud protests when these are cynically breached – can seem worth transplanting.

Hazards of partisanship

Another aspect of the American journalistic tradition inspires envy in some places. Its stress on editorial neutrality and detachment from politics can seem immensely appealing to some with first-hand experience of journalistic partisanship. Partisan media systems tend to generate an alliance between a section of the media and government. This can have negative results when there is a high degree of media concentration and the media are lopsidedly partisan in one direction. The prime illustration of this problem is Berlusconi's Italy.⁵⁷

Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's foremost TV mogul, was the first person in Western Europe to be allowed to effectively control the terrestrial commercial television system of an entire nation, albeit one which has popular public television. By 1992, Berlusconi's TV channels accounted for 43 per cent⁵⁸ and by the early 2000s 45

per cent of total viewing time (and 90 per cent of commercial television viewing time) in Italy.⁵⁹ In addition, Berlusconi possessed or acquired substantial interests in publishing, advertising, construction, insurance and food.

Berlusconi's media and business empires became the launch pad for his political rise. During the early 1990s, the governing political class was discredited by public corruption scandals. Berlusconi filled the resulting political vacuum by creating in 1993 a 'plastic' political party, with few members, many of whom were his employees and their friends. The party's launch was meticulously planned, with careful market research and sustained promotion, almost as if the electorate was a new market to conquer. The new political party was named after the football chant 'Go Italy' – *Forza Italia* – and teamed up with two other rightwing parties, with regional bases respectively in the north and south. In 1994, they won the general election, with strong support from Berlusconi's television channels. Around fifty of Berlusconi's employees were elected to parliament, and Berlusconi himself became prime minister without ever holding public office before. Although Berlusconi's first administration lasted only seven months, Berlusconi again won power in 2001 at the head of essentially the same rightwing coalition. This time his administration proved to be the longest-serving in post-war Italian history. After being defeated in 2006, Berlusconi was elected in 2008 to head a new government, with a majority in both houses of parliament. Berlusconi thus parlayed his position as media tycoon to become the dominant figure in Italy's notoriously fissile politics.

However, it would be too simplistic to suggest that Berlusconi achieved political pre-eminence only because of his media power. In 1992–4, the implosion of the political class (to which, ironically, Berlusconi was closely linked) presented him with the opportunity to make a breakthrough as a 'clean hands' outsider. Berlusconi then consolidated his position partly because he was a media-savvy politician, with a shrewd instinct for headlines, populist policies and projection of personality. He was a man at ease with the new style of politics. But he was also adept in the old political arts: an astute mediator, with great charm, he held together the sparring partners of his political coalition and restructured its main bloc in a more stable form in 2007. Above all, he reconstituted the dominant centre-right coalition in a new form by articulating the central themes of Christian Democracy (patriotism, family values, law and order and the perils of socialism) to an Italian version of neo-liberalism (individualism, consumerism, hedonism and low-tax anti-statism), underpinned increasingly by a virulent hatred of immigrants. This rebuilding of the centre-right was helped by the failures of the left,⁶⁰ and received its due reward in an inherently conservative country. Italy had voted for the right or centre-right in every election between 1948 and 1992. In effect, Berlusconi assisted the country to return to its natural political home after an interim period of turbulence.

However, the interaction between media and political power in Italy proved to be neither good for government nor the media. Thus, Berlusconi used state office to consolidate and extend his media power base. When the Constitutional Court ruled that one of Berlusconi's television channels (*Rete 4*) should be moved to cable or satellite TV in order to reduce Berlusconi's domination of terrestrial commercial television, Berlusconi's government promptly passed, in 2003, a law to overturn the court's judgment. The new law both legitimated Berlusconi's

continued domination of commercial TV and also facilitated a further expansion of his media empire.

Berlusconi further abused his office to extend his influence over RAI, the public broadcaster. Its three channels had been orientated respectively towards the right, centre and left. However, following the corruption scandals of the early 1990s, RAI had gravitated towards an 'above politics', neutral orientation, something that Berlusconi set out to change. His minister of communications, Maurizio Gasparri, publicly declared in 2002 that it was time to 'stop flying and come down to earth. Let's forget the "above faction" journalists: we prefer the ones who are loyal'.⁶¹ Loyalists were shoehorned into top managerial posts, people like Fabrizio Del Noce – a former Forza Italia senator – who was appointed as the new director of RAI 1. Under the new regime, episodes of a satire programme poking fun at Berlusconi were cancelled abruptly in late 2002. When a camera shot lingered on a protester standing outside a tribunal where the prime minister was accused of corruption in May 2003, RAI's director general ordered an official investigation of RAI 3 news, leading to abrasive interviews with its staff. Berlusconi was directly involved in this campaign of intimidation. He publicly accused in 2003 two critical broadcasters – Enzo Biagi, the presenter of a celebrated public affairs programme on RAI 1, and Michele Santoro, a top journalist on RAI 1 and 2 – of making 'criminal use of television', adding that 'I believe that RAI's new management has a definite duty to stop this from happening'.⁶² The two journalists' contracts were not renewed for the next season, 2003/4, in a move that was plainly intended to foster self-censorship by other journalists. This relentless pressure continued with, for example, RAI 3's Lucia Annunziata being threatened with disciplinary action after asking Berlusconi tough questions in March 2006.

Berlusconi never in fact 'captured' the public broadcasting system, which continued to provide airtime for opposition viewpoints. But Berlusconi's assured control of commercial television, and subsequent intimidation of RAI, had two important consequences. It gave Berlusconi a built-in political advantage in that he appeared more frequently on television than his opponents, was cited more often and tended to be portrayed more favourably.⁶³ It also affected the tone and frame of reference of news reporting in general, especially in relation to corruption.

As a businessman, Berlusconi had sailed close to the wind, causing him to be pursued by legal furies for almost two decades. Among other things, he was arraigned for false accounting, tax fraud, bribing the financial police, corrupting judges, making illegal contributions to political parties, money laundering, having illegal ties with the Mafia, anti-trust violations and bribing a witness to commit perjury. Indeed, Berlusconi was sentenced in 1998 to two years in gaol for bribing the financial police – a verdict overturned on appeal, though his lawyer, Massimo Berruti, was sent down for the offence in 2001. Another of Berlusconi's lawyers (and a close friend and former member of his cabinet), Cesare Previti, was also found guilty of corruption charges in 2003. Berlusconi's response to the pressing attentions of the judiciary was to rewrite the law. In 2001–6, Berlusconi's government decriminalised false accounts statements; made it easier to transfer court cases to another part of Italy (in order to facilitate acquittal); introduced a much shorter statute of limitation for white-collar crime; and suspended trials against senior

officers of state (this last was struck down as unconstitutional). Berlusconi's first priority, comments David Lane, 'was the enactment of bespoke laws to get the prime minister off his legal hooks'.⁶⁴

This use of public office to deflect prosecution continued into Berlusconi's third term, when he faced charges for tax fraud and for suborning a witness, the British lawyer David Mills, who was found guilty of giving false testimony on his behalf. In 2008, a bill was passed which gave Berlusconi legal immunity in order that he should not be distracted from affairs of state. In 2009, this bill was thrown out by the Constitutional Court.

Berlusconi's influence over the media resulted in its failure to scrutinise government effectively. Corruption prosecutions could have been reported with evangelical zeal, as a continuation of the 'clean hands' campaign in which the public *demand*ed an end to government abuse. Instead, prosecutions and court cases tended to be reported in a different register, as being 'controversial', because government ministers accused judges and prosecutors of leftwing bias; or as being 'inconclusive', just another episode in Italy's byzantine legal process; and, by the time of the third Berlusconi administration, simply received less media attention.

Berlusconi also emerged as a Teflon-coated politician, partly because the absence of aggressive media scrutiny (save by leftwing newspapers and magazines, with obvious axes to grind) gave him an unusual degree of leeway. There were tensions between the ideas he represented; fractures in the image he projected; and contradictions between what he said and did. It was only when the incongruity between his political championship of family values and his consorting with prostitutes became too great in 2009 to overlook that his qualified media 'protection' was lifted (with the help of the Internet).

In brief, the recent political history of Italy represents a cautionary experience. It highlights the dangers inherent in the fusion of media and political power, which encourages bad government and compromised reporting. It is no wonder that reflective Italians began to speculate in the Berlusconi era whether America offered a better way of doing journalism.

World triumph and domestic decline

Thus, large numbers of people around the world came to admire the independence, sense of public purpose and political neutrality of American journalism. For example, numerous journalists in Malta,⁶⁵ Mexico,⁶⁶ Brazil⁶⁷ and Latin America more generally⁶⁸ espoused American journalistic norms as a way of 'reforming' their media. These norms were tacitly championed by the US-dominated World Association of Newspapers, which expanded its membership both during and after the Cold War.⁶⁹ They also tended to be championed by new schools of journalism that emerged in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.⁷⁰

Yet, during this period of international triumph, when American journalists basked in the admiration of a growing number of their peers around the world, American journalism went into decline. This was because the foundation of the American experiment – its partially successful attempt to separate business from journalism – was undermined by increased commercialisation.

The American TV networks were all bought or merged during the 1980s. Their new controllers refused to tolerate the losses incurred by their news divisions. This had perhaps something to do with the revocation of residual FCC regulation during the 1980s which clarified the status of TV licences as, in effect, private properties rather than as renewable trusts with quantifiable public obligations.⁷¹ But it was also fuelled by the demand for rising returns on publicly traded shares, often with linked remuneration packages for senior executives. This pressure to optimise dividends and stock values also strongly influenced American newspapers during this period.⁷² They were required to deliver much higher profits in the 1980s compared with two decades earlier,⁷³ and this pressure was maintained in the subsequent period.⁷⁴

At the same time, it became increasingly difficult to deliver what shareholders demanded. American newspapers entered an accelerated phase of decline from the 1970s onwards. The TV networks experienced falling ratings as a result of the rise of cable and satellite TV. Between 1970 and 2001, the number of television channels received in the average American household increased from seven to seventy-one.⁷⁵ And in the 2000s, both American newspapers and television had to fend off competition from the Internet, which had become by then a 'mass' medium available in most homes.

This conjunction of increased stockholder pressure and greater competition weakened the autonomy of American journalists. This was reflected in successive surveys in 1982, 1992 and 2002 registering decreases in the proportion of American journalists who said that they were free to select their own stories, determine the emphasis of their stories or get important stories covered in the news.⁷⁶ This weakening of professional power resulted in a greater drive towards simplicity and entertainment, reflected in an increase in soft-news stories on network TV news in 1994–8 compared with 1974–8.⁷⁷ It also contributed to a reduction of foreign news coverage by American newspapers in the 1970s and 1990s,⁷⁸ and a reduction of TV news investment in foreign newsgathering.⁷⁹ Increased commercialisation also contributed to the growth of low-cost, 'magazine' and virtual reality shows, both strongly influenced by entertainment values.

These developments threw into sharp relief the nature of the settlement between commerce and professionalism that had been struck earlier. While American TV network news journalists had been given considerable freedom and large resources to report the news, they had also been sidelined. Their news programmes were transmitted at the edge of prime time, at 6.30 p.m. (and in some time zones earlier) in order to create space for uninterrupted entertainment at peak viewing times. This marginalisation reflected the underlying commercial logic of the American television system, which was driven by profit seeking rather than the desire to serve democracy.

This said, change brought some positive outcomes, partly because it was accompanied by more channels and increased provision. The drive to convert occasional network news viewers into regular ones increased coverage of some relatively neglected issues, like education and health, of greater concern to women.⁸⁰ The growth of virtual reality shows created space for minority voices to be expressed,⁸¹ although they were also arenas where the vulnerable were bullied and the disadvantaged were rebuked rather than heard.⁸² New television channels, which reported

national and international news in prime time, also came into being, though they generally attracted low audiences.⁸³ By far the greatest gain of TV expansion was the development of a new economic model for television fiction production, based on premier subscription rather than advertising, that gave rise to high-quality drama (associated with HBO).⁸⁴ But as far as news reporting was concerned, increased commercialisation encouraged the growth of soft news at the expense of hard news, the reporting of elections more in terms of horse races than in terms of policy difference and declining coverage of the outside world, save where American troops were engaged in military action.⁸⁵

Subversion of an ideal

This was partly also because the core values of American journalism came under attack in their heartland. The norm of journalistic neutrality had been upheld not just by professional values but also by the 'fairness doctrine' introduced by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1949, which required broadcasters to present contrasting views on controversial issues. This regulation was revoked in 1987, opening the way for partisan journalism on the airwaves. One year later, Rush Limbaud started an unabashedly rightwing radio show in New York. With the help of a growing number of local radio stations (most notably the giant Clear Channel Communications group) that syndicated his show, Limbaud built – for radio – a large national audience. His success led to imitation, including a 'Liberal Radio' alternative that attracted many fewer listeners. A distinctive genre of partisan radio journalism became part of the media landscape.

This was followed by the launch of the Fox News Channel in 1996. Although claiming to be fair and balanced, it developed a rightwing news agenda and introduced ferociously conservative political commentators. This new style of journalism attracted a substantial audience, for a cable/satellite TV channel. This encouraged a rival channel, MSNBC (also launched in 1996), to develop a liberal-leaning style of journalistic commentary. Partisan journalism thus came to occupy a substantial niche in both American television and radio journalism.

The rise of Fox News, in particular, signified not just a rejection of political neutrality, but something that seemed 'foreign'. The devolution of control within American news organisations had helped to neutralise the big business ownership of the media. But Rupert Murdoch, the principal owner of the Fox News Channel, was a wealthy businessman with strongly held conservative, pro-free-market, small government views. He had foisted these views on other parts of his global media empire through the exercise of shareholder power.⁸⁶ In the 1990s, he did the same thing in America. Conservative senior executives and journalists were put in place to orientate Fox News so that it echoed the political prejudices of its principal owner. The rise of this new style of journalism thus marked the compromising entanglement of American journalism with vested economic power.

Another source of subversion took the form of the rise of tabloid journalism. During the Hutchins reformist era, tabloid journalism had existed at the margins, primarily in the form of supermarket magazines like the *National Enquirer*. These last concentrated on news about celebrity, sex, crime and gossip, though occasionally

breaking stories about erring politicians. They were regularly accused of distorting and even fabricating stories,⁸⁷ in a way that emphasised their 'otherness', their transgression from the norms of ethical mainstream American journalism.

But from the 1970s onwards, local television channels discovered that they could make money by developing a cheap form of local sensational journalism. As one pioneering study argued, their evolving formula emphasised images over ideas, emotion over analysis, simplification over complexity, driven by what was cheap to report and generated good ratings.⁸⁸ This led to supplementing the staples of local journalism – weather, sport, accidents and so on – with an increasing volume of stories featuring violent crime that conveyed drama and emotion, and was accompanied by strong visual material. By the 1990s, local television news in the major conurbations projected an alarming image of a broken society, characterised by wave after wave of robberies, murders, carjackings, gang wars and police chases.⁸⁹ Local TV news became, as Iyengar and McGrady tartly observe, 'essentially a televised police blotter'.⁹⁰ This proved to be very successful in market terms: local TV news built very large audiences, even overtaking national network news (despite the fact that local TV ratings began to decline during the 1990s).⁹¹ Its success resulted in tabloid norms finding a prominent place in the mainstream of American journalism.

The revival of partisan and tabloid styles of journalism – once prominent in the nineteenth century – represented a reverse for the social responsibility tradition. It also meant that American journalism ceased to be as distinctive as it once was. The US media now exhibit features that are to be found in other parts of the world.

Setbacks

Traditional news professionalism is threatened by the take-off of the Internet as a mass medium. This has such profound implications for the development of journalism that it needs a separate chapter (Chapter 7) to be addressed properly. But anticipating a little, the migration of 'old media' advertising to the web led to the closure of some American newspapers, editorial budget cuts and a 20 per cent reduction in the number of American journalists employed in the eight years up to 2009. The rise of bloggers and web-based media start-ups did not compensate for this decline, because they failed to secure an adequate revenue stream to sustain them.

Over the long term the Internet may well rejuvenate journalism, especially if it is accompanied by constructive public policies. But the cumulative decoupling of advertising from news production which brought about the rise of the Internet also poses a major problem that is likely to endure. The great triumphs of American journalism – such as investigations into the abuse of power by President Nixon, Chicago police and a prison health corporation cited earlier – have usually come about as a consequence of the secondment of a skilled journalist or journalists for months to track down an important story. It is precisely this kind of *high-cost* journalism which is endangered by the economic crisis enveloping traditional news media in the United States.

American journalism also became subject to sustained criticism in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War. The Bush administration 'sold' the war to the American

people partly on the basis of a false prospectus. The government repeatedly claimed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and significant links to the terrorists behind the 9/11 attacks on America. In fact, no weapons of mass destruction or an advanced programme for making them were found in Iraq after its occupation. It was also acknowledged subsequently by government agencies that the secular Ba'athist regime in Iraq did not have close ties to the Islamic fundamentalist group al-Qaida, who were behind the 9/11 attacks.

These revelations gave rise to the accusation that the American media had failed the public by reporting prominently the government's case for invading Iraq without adequately scrutinising its validity. This indictment was conceded by some leading journalists. For example, the *New York Times* criticised its own performance in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War:

Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more scepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper ... Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all.⁹²

Academic scrutiny has tended also to find American news media to be wanting.⁹³ Thus Hayes and Guardino undertook a quantitative analysis of all Iraq-related evening news stories – totalling 1,434 – transmitted by the three TV networks in the eight months before the invasion.⁹⁴ They found that Bush administration officials were the most frequently quoted sources, while scant attention was given to domestic opposition to the war. Indeed, anti-war groups accounted for a mere 1 per cent of quotations, while Democratic representatives (including some who were anti-war) accounted for only 4 per cent.

But while domestic anti-war voices were almost inaudible on network news, Bush administration claims were counterposed by those from the Hussein administration. Perhaps more significantly, since the Hussein administration was portrayed in a strongly negative light that undermined its credibility, network television news also quoted leaders of the French, German and Russian governments and UN officials, all of whom tended to take a different line from that of the Bush administration. This attempt to achieve neutrality was flawed, since 'a plurality of news stories focused on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction ... and TV news reports cast a possible invasion in a more positive than negative light'.⁹⁵ The networks also offered a heavily establishment perspective: 79 per cent of all sources quoted were official ones. But at least the networks' under-representation of domestic opposition to the war was partly offset by their reporting of foreign opposition.

There was also something admirable about the way in which American journalists collectively reflected upon their performance after the dust of war had died down. Thus, the much-denigrated senior *New York Times* journalist Judith Miller answered her critics by saying that it was not her fault if government sources got it wrong. 'My job isn't to assess the government's information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself', she declared. 'My job is to tell readers of the *New York Times* what the government thought about Iraq's arsenal.'⁹⁶ This drew the acid

reply from *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd that investigative journalism is not the same as the stenography of power, something that she implied might be lost on Judith Miller, ‘the Fourth Estate’s Becky Sharp’, with her ‘tropism toward powerful men’.⁹⁷ Despite the personal undercurrents of this exchange, this debate – and the wider dialogue of which it was a part – reflected a serious engagement with a thorny issue: the perennial tension between rival conceptions of journalism as a witness and as a watchdog, between factual dispassion and interpretative truth telling, at the heart of the professional tradition. It also reflected an attempt by a public-minded group of journalists to address its collective failure, learn from past mistakes and do better next time.

It is precisely this public consciousness, this willingness to engage in critical self-reflection, which enables the American professional tradition to renew itself, and which has resulted in a long record of distinguished journalism. But this tradition is now beset by multiple problems – an economic crisis, deepening commercialisation, a reduction of journalistic autonomy, a revival of rival journalistic traditions and public criticism that journalists themselves partly endorsed. In brief, the shining city on the hill does not seem quite so luminous to those who actually live there.

Relativising American achievement

The American cultural strategy of media reformism is not the only one available. Indeed, a very similar conception of media professionalism holds sway in British broadcasting, which has also adopted an independent, ‘above politics’, neutral mode of news reporting. But this shared approach is pursued in different ways. Whereas the American strategy is based on developing a ‘voluntaristic’ culture of professionalism within market institutions, the British approach seeks to actively support a professional culture through institutional arrangements. This includes the creation of two buffers – one against market censorship and the other against government censorship. Thus, Britain’s principal broadcasting organisation, the BBC, is generously funded by the public through an obligatory TV licence fee in order to create a space for journalists to be independent of market pressure. Checks and balances – a BBC governing trust composed of people of different views and connections, *ad hoc* independent panels advising on the appointment of the BBC director general, parliamentary select committee and regulator scrutiny, all underpinned *crucially* by broadcasting staff and public support for television independence – create a shield against government control. And the autonomy of the broadcasting system as a whole is further supported by a legal obligation to display due impartiality in reporting controversial issues.

This resulted in British television reporting the build-up to the Iraq War in a more independent way than its American counterpart. Indeed, the head of government communications, Alastair Campbell, publicly accused the BBC of having ‘an anti-war agenda’,⁹⁸ while a controversial report by a leading judge argued that the BBC went too far in impugning the integrity of the government’s ‘sexed-up’ case for war.⁹⁹ The government’s claims that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction posed an external threat, that the Iraqi people should be rescued from a tyrant, that invasion

was sanctioned by a prior UN resolution and that it would make Britain safer from terrorism were widely aired on television news and current affairs programmes. But so too were a number of counter-arguments: namely, that the weapons-inspection process should be completed and diplomacy given a chance to succeed; that there was no hard evidence that weapons of mass destruction existed; that invasion would be illegal without a fresh UN mandate; that it would lead to death and destruction, and in the long term civil war and destabilisation of the region; and that the effect of invasion would be to increase rather than contain global terrorism.

However, perhaps the main reason why American and British television coverage in the run-up to war differed was because they were responding to different political environments. Unlike Britain, the US had been exposed to a major terrorist attack in 2001, giving rise to a bellicose climate of public opinion. While some Democratic politicians opposed the war, their leaders were in favour, and the Democratic Party as a whole tended to hedge its bets in the patriotic context of post-9/11.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, there was a cumulative build-up of opposition to the war within the governing Labour Party in Britain. As early as September 2002, the BBC reported that the majority of Labour backbench MPs, in its survey, were anti-war.¹⁰¹ Despite enormous pressure from the Whips' office, about half of Labour MPs not on the government payroll voted against the Iraq invasion in parliament,¹⁰² and two Labour cabinet ministers (including former foreign secretary, Robin Cook) resigned over the issue. Dissenting Labour MPs were joined by some senior Conservatives (including Kenneth Clarke, former chancellor of the exchequer, and John Gummer, former Conservative Party chairman), as well as by all Liberal MPs. This highlights a further key difference between the political context in the US and the UK: the opposition to the war was more broadly based in Britain. This was reflected in the press, with for example the pro-Conservative *Daily Mail* joining the pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* in opposing the war.¹⁰³ This opposition (including prominent church leaders) was galvanised by an anti-war coalition that staged in February 2003 the biggest national demonstration in Britain's political history. This surpassed the Kennington Chartist demonstration for the vote, and was very much larger than the equivalent demonstration in the US, despite the latter's larger population. This in turn reflected greater public disapproval of war in Britain compared to the US, registered in pre-invasion opinion polls.¹⁰⁴

The importance of the wider political environment is further corroborated by the way in which British and American television reporting, and media reporting more generally, became more similar when their troops invaded Iraq. Journalists in both countries responded to convergent influences to rally behind their country's troops when they were engaged in actual military action.¹⁰⁵

In short, the culture of news production matters,¹⁰⁶ as the achievements of American professionalism testify. The institutional arrangements of news media – influencing how they are financed and managed, their cultures and organisational goals – also affect news output.¹⁰⁷ But the wider context of society also strongly influences the news, not least through the cultural air that journalists breathe and what news sources say to them. To understand more fully what shapes American journalism, and influences its performance, it is necessary therefore to take a closer look at American society. This we will do by linking it to an appraisal of a commanding new orthodoxy in media research.