

British Media in the 1980s

Like all aspects of British life in the Eighties developments in the media have been marked by the economic and ideological effects of Thatcherism—an increasing emphasis on the market, on privatisation and an attempt to renegotiate the role of the State. While all the media have been affected it is particularly in the two most influential—television and the national press—that change has been most profound.

The Media in 1980

Looking back to 1980 we find a much simpler television service than now, with only three broadcast channels. Half the national audience watched BBC1 or BBC2—channels with little regional variation and a pure public service remit (funded by a compulsory licence fee levied on each set). The alternative was the more regionally based service of ITV, which balanced public service against the need to please its advertisers by providing large audiences. Less than 3% of homes had a video recorder and much programming still assumed the model of a family audience clustered around a set in the main living-room.

As with television the national newspaper scene had changed little during the Seventies. A pattern begun in the Sixties had continued whereby the sales of both serious quality papers and the popular tabloids grew proportionately at the expense of the previously dominant middlerange papers (papers which drew their readership in roughly equal proportions from all social classes). A sharp polarisation had developed (influenced by television's rise to dominance in the Sixties as the main national news medium), forcing papers to choose between the roles of popular entertainment medium (often packed with news about television itself!) and of service to the specialist needs of particular sectors of the middle-class. The two most successful papers of the Seventies, *The Guardian* (centre-left in politics and aiming at such groups as social workers, teachers and media professionals) and *The Sun* (right-wing, populist and rabidly nationalistic), by their very difference, illustrate this trend, while the one national paper to be founded in the Seventies, the *Daily Star*, was an attempt by the owners of one of the declining middlerange papers (the *Daily Express*) to emulate the success of *The Sun*.

Television by 1990

Ten years on much has changed in both media. Television's transformation began earlier and has been more diverse. Over the decade an extension and fragmentation of its audience has taken place, together with a change in the very conception of the television user. Firstly

new services have been added within the existing format. The origins of Channel Four (which opened in 1982) lie in the alternative cultural ideas of the late Sixties, when pressure began for a new Open Broadcasting Authority which would allow a greater diversity of opinions than that afforded by the in-house productions and commitment to 'balance' of the BBC and ITV. The political turbulence of the Seventies saw this idea retarded and changed and the final Channel Four blueprint, drawn up by the first Thatcher government, combined earlier left-wing critiques of the State with a new emphasis on encouraging privatisation and the small entrepreneur. Channel Four was required to provide an alternative service (including meeting the needs of minority groups), to be funded by advertising (with a safety-net) and to buy in all its programmes from outside. The traditional requirement to limit the amount of non-British programming was retained, illustrating a frequent dilemma of Thatcherite conservatism—how to reconcile a free market ideology with a strong nationalism. In the event Channel Four has been a major success and now commands about 10% of the national audience.

A related development has been the considerable extension of regular broadcasting hours. The introduction of 'breakfast television' in 1983 encouraged the idea that regular viewing should not be confined to evening news and entertainment. Subsequently both all night broadcasting and full daytime services have become commonplace and half of all British households now possess two or more sets; television viewing has now reached the stage where *individual* rather than family viewing is consciously sought by programme schedulers and advertisers and sets may be found distributed throughout all rooms of the house.

These changes by themselves may imply an increasingly passive 'tellysoaked' mass of British viewers. However another set of innovations has changed many of the traditional ways in which sets are used. The growth of remote-control devices has given the viewer some incentive not to remain locked into one channel's scheduling; indeed advertisers have expressed anxiety about viewers 'cruising' across channels during the commercial breaks. More active usage still is enabled by the growth of teletext as a facility on home sets; here the function of the set changes and the viewer's relation to the cultural offering becomes more like that of a magazine or newspaper reader (with hundreds of pages of information to select from). The most dramatic change however has been the remarkable growth of home video recorders (VCRs). In 1990 there are 13 million VCRs in British homes as against half a million in 1980; 61% of families use them regularly. At first VCRs were used almost exclusively for time-shift viewing, but this was soon followed by a speedy and disorganised growth of rental outlets, many offering both 'pirate' video (current

feature films illegally recorded) and 'video nasties' (particularly explicit violent horror films). Such material had previously been subject to censorship or certification before being shown in the cinema and the idea that it might now become accessible to children within the family home caused a major moral panic (and new legal curbs) during the mid-Eighties. A more stable system of providing material for both rental and purchase then evolved and revision of the copyright laws made home videotaping of broadcast material legal; now the home video has become a domestic necessity and younger children especially regard it as a standard part of domestic television. For many re-viewing a favourite programme can have the same role as re-reading, or hearing again the same familiar comforting story.

A third area of change in television is still in its infancy. Both cable and direct broadcast satellite (DBS) transmission have had a lean time in the Eighties. Initially Thatcherite ideology saw in cable a prime example of how to create a commercial challenge to state monopolies. A Cable Authority was set up to promote growth and a number of companies began operation in the mid-Eighties, with mixed success. The 'churn' effect (subscribers staying only a short time) was considerable and, compared to other Western industrial countries, the rapid spread of home video had pre-empted the need for an extended range of service. DBS had an even more troubled start, as one financial consortium after another failed to materialise; however by 1989 the battle lines were drawn as Murdoch's Sky channel was launched followed in Spring 1990 by the rival British Satellite Broadcasting (BSB). Both Sky and BSB are prepared for heavy losses in the early years and as the Nineties begin it is satellite broadcasting which is likely to be the most significant growth area; by May 1990 0.8 million dishes had been installed and the long-awaited breakthrough had begun.

National Press by 1990

In the early Eighties there was little sign that the largely static national newspaper market was preparing for change. After the 1983 election however, as it became clear that Thatcherism was not to be a short-lived phenomenon, a long-predicted attack on the power of the printing unions (and their commitment to traditional 'hot-metal' printing as against direct-inputting by new technology) developed in two phases. Eddie Shah, a provincial newspaper owner with a history of industrial conflict, launched in 1986 the first national daily (*Today*) to be printed outside Fleet Street, with new technology, and containing colour photos. Simultaneously Rupert Murdoch opened his new printing plant at Wapping in London's Docklands. The plant, allegedly built to launch a new daily paper, in fact became the base for all Murdoch's national papers (including *The Times* and *The Sun*) after his sacking of most of his existing print staff in early 1986.

These two events heralded a quite different second half for the decade. The most successful new paper of the Eighties *The Independent*, was launched in late 1986. A quality paper, started by dissatisfied staff from the *Daily Telegraph*, it was well capitalised, had researched its market thoroughly and gained both staff and readers from *The Times*, where the bitter Wapping dispute confirmed that, under Murdoch, the paper had lost its traditional role as a reliable and neutral commentator. With its excellent design and a style more staid and respectable than the *Guardian*, *The Independent* has, by 1990, fully established itself. Other newcomers proved more short-lived. The avowedly socialist *News on Sunday* lasted only six months in 1987, failing through under-capitalisation and lack of advertising, as well as through indecisiveness as to whether it was a middlemarket or popular paper. Robert Maxwell's *London Daily News* (intended to make use of the flexible new technology to print up to six editions daily) was forced to close very quickly after a price-cutting war with the existing London evening paper, the *Evening Standard*. Eddie Shah's *Today* itself soon ran into financial difficulties and was first bailed out by Lonrho (which owned the quality Sunday *The Observer*) and then sold to Murdoch in mid-1987. Shah failed again in late 1988 when *The Post* (designed as a popular daily without the sex and sensationalism of the *Sun*) lasted barely two months. More successful was the *Sunday Sport*, launched by soft-porn publisher David Sullivan in 1986. With very few journalists, a policy of printing incredible stories ('Presley still alive', 'wartime bomber plane found on Moon'), many topless photos and a lot of sport, the paper had achieved a circulation of 500,000 by the end of the decade and had launched Wednesday and Friday editions also. Finally the Sunday-quality market responded to the expanded opportunity shown by the *Independent*, when the *Sunday Correspondent* was launched in 1989 followed by the *Independent on Sunday* in early 1990. By then all the major newspaper proprietors had followed Murdoch's lead by introducing new technology and moving out of Fleet Street to 'greenfield sites' in South or East London.

Regulating the Media

The story so far perhaps seems one of successful Thatcherite economics and ideology, with increasing competition and consumer choice expanding the diversity of provision. However consumers can only choose from what they are offered and on the 'supply side' there have been a number of trends during the decade which suggest greater regulation and restriction rather than more choice. The press have been curbed by new legislation (including a Contempt of Court Act, restricting the reporting of trials, and a revised Official Secrets Act); equally despite a small increase in the number of national papers, the dominant role of the big proprietors is, if anything, greater than a

decade ago. Murdoch's purchase of *Today* and his ability to sustain losses while building up circulation show the necessity of a strong capital base to start any new paper. The late Eighties have in fact been marked by increasing concern about cross-media monopoly ownership, as Murdoch's papers unashamedly promoted the launch of Sky Television in a way which hardly distinguished between news and advertising.

Many such issues have surfaced in the public debate over the recent Broadcasting Bill, designed to re-shape television for the 1990s. Characteristically the Government has proved more anxious to seek financial de-regulation than to release its grip on the content of what is broadcast. Indeed such Eighties developments as the ban on live speech from the IRA, the attack by Norman Tebbit on the BBC's coverage of the American bombing of Libya and the introduction of a new Broadcasting Standards Council all suggest an unwillingness to pursue laissez-faire ideas to their logical conclusion. The main debate about the Bill itself has centred around the idea of 'quality television'. The original proposal was for a 'quality threshold' which each bidder for an ITV franchise would have to pass; after this the franchise would be sold to the highest bidder. Following fierce opposition this has been amended to allow that in some circumstances the franchise might go to a lower bidder; the attempt goes on to achieve the aim of having franchises awarded directly to the highest quality bidder (once, perhaps, a 'financial threshold' has been passed).

With the uncertain outcome of the bill and the growth of satellite competition to add to the still increasing video market, the easily identifiable central core of British television (such as existed in 1980) continues to erode—although there is some feeling that the general market confusion may enable the BBC to retain and even strengthen its dominant position in the Nineties. Newspapers as a whole may also profit from this—perhaps regaining a more central and unifying role, as the success of both Murdoch's *Today* (the first successful new middlemarket daily paper for over 50 years) and *The Independent* has suggested. As in so many areas of British life during the Eighties, Thatcherism has introduced within the media an unexpected volatility and an expectation of further continuous change; under a new political and ideological climate in the Nineties this may well have even more surprising and unpredictable results.

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