

8 Narratives of media history revisited

Introduction

It was chance that took me to see *Copenhagen*, a play that re-enacts, from different perspectives, fateful interchanges between a Danish and German physicist during the 1930s and 1940s. It gave me the idea of presenting British media history as a series of competing narratives in the opening chapter of my book *Media and Power*.¹ This outline subsequently provided the organising framework for a good collection of essays on media history.²

In adopting an unconventional formula for a literature review, I was responding to what seemed to me to be three underlying problems. British media history is highly fragmented, being subdivided by period, medium and interpretative strand. It is often narrowly centred on media institutions and content, leaving the wider setting of society as a shadowy background. And media history has not become as central in media studies as one might have expected, given that it is a grandparent of the field. So I was looking for a way of integrating *medium* history into general accounts of *media* development, and of connecting these to the 'mainframe' of general history. I was also seeking to convey how media history illuminates the role of the media in society – in the present, as well as the past.

In returning to the subject of my essay some seven years after it was first written, I shall attempt to do two things. I will briefly restate the essay's central themes, though in a new way by concentrating primarily on recent research. I will also suggest, with great diffidence, possible new directions in which media history might develop in the future, including the reclaiming of 'lost narratives'.

Dominant tradition

Any review of British media history must begin with its leading and longest-established interpretation – the liberal narrative. This was first scripted, in its initial form, in the nineteenth century and comes out of the hallowed tradition of 'constitutional' history which examines the development of Britain's political system from Anglo-Saxon times to the present.

Key landmarks in Britain's constitutional evolution are said to be the defeat of absolutist monarchy, the establishment of the rule of law, the strengthening of parliament and the introduction of mass democracy in five, cautious, instalments. It

is also claimed that the media acquired a 'constitutional' role by becoming the voice of the people and a popular check on government.

The media's constitutional elevation is usually described in terms of two intertwined narrative themes. The first recounts how the press became free of government control by the mid-nineteenth century, followed by the liberation of film and broadcasting in the mid-twentieth century. The second theme is concerned with how liberated media empowered the people. Recent historical work has focused on the latter, so this is what we shall concentrate upon.

There is broad agreement among liberal media historians that the rise of a more independent press changed the tenor and dynamics of English politics. Newspapers increased their political content during the eighteenth century, and successfully defied during the 1760s the ban on the reporting of parliament. This enabled newspapers to shine a low-wattage light on the previously private world of aristocratic politics. People outside the political system could observe, through the press, factional battles among their rulers. How spectators reacted to these battles began to matter, as increasing references in the later eighteenth century to the wider public testify. In a more general sense, the rise of the press was part of a profound shift in which it came to be accepted that the general public had the right to debate and evaluate the actions of their rulers. Some publications also directly attacked corruption and oligarchy, functioning as pioneer watchdogs monitoring the abuse of official power. In short, the growth of public disclosure through the press rendered the governmental system more open and accountable.³

The expansion of the press after the end of licensing in 1694 also contributed, it is argued, to the building of a representative institution. During the eighteenth century, newspapers mushroomed in different parts of the country and expanded their readership. An increased number of newspapers published views as well as news reports, seeking to speak for their readers. By the 1850s, following a period of rapid expansion and enhanced independence, the press allegedly came of age as an empowering agency. Its thunder echoed down the corridors of power.

However, the central unanswered question at the heart of this eloquent liberal narrative is precisely *who* was being represented by this 'empowering' press. A much-favoured answer used to be that the expanding press was speaking primarily for the dynamic forces of the 'new society': that is to say, the expanding middle classes and urban working class brought into being by rapid economic growth in the 'first industrial nation'.⁴ This interpretation stressed the progressive nature of the evolving press, the way in which it broke free from the political agenda of the landed elite and supported campaigns to reform the institutions of the British aristocratic state. Indeed, in some versions of this argument, the growing power of the press both reflected the changed balance of social forces in British society and contributed to the building of a new, post-aristocratic political settlement.

This beguiling interpretation has been undermined from two different directions. Revisionist histories of nineteenth-century Britain increasingly emphasise continuity rather than radical change. They point to the embedded nature of the *ancien régime* before the extension of the franchise; the powerful pull of Anglicanism, localism and tradition; the incremental, uneven nature of the industrial revolution; and, above all, the landed elite's continued dominance of political life until late

in the nineteenth century.⁵ Meanwhile historical studies of the press have drawn attention to the continuing importance of the conservative press (which greatly strengthened in the last quarter of the eighteenth century), the enormous diversity of nineteenth-century newspapers and the tenuous evidence that the press strongly influenced political elites and public policy, save in special circumstances.⁶ The thesis that an independent press, representative of a transformed society, helped to forge a new political order is now widely disputed.

So whom did the press represent? The undermining of the claim that the later Hanoverian press represented a progressive social alliance has encouraged a return to a traditionalist Whig view of the press as the voice of an indeterminate 'public'. Typical of this shift is Hannah Barker's now standard textbook, which argues that newspapers gained a larger and more socially diverse readership and came to be shaped primarily by their customers in the absence of strict government censorship. 'The importance of sales to newspaper profits', she writes, 'forced papers to echo the views of their readers in order to thrive.'⁷ By 1855, she concludes, 'the newspaper press in England was largely free of government interference and was able – with some justification – to proclaim itself as the fourth estate of the British constitution'.⁸ In her view, the press informed and represented public opinion and made it a powerful political force.⁹

However, some liberal historians remain rightly uneasy about viewing the press as the voice of an undefined (and indivisible) public. Jeremy Black, for example, argues that 'the press was at best a limited guide to the opinions of the public' and should be viewed as connecting to 'public opinions rather than public opinion'.¹⁰ This more nuanced view enables him to conclude that 'public culture' (in which the press was central) became less representative of political difference during the post-Chartist era.¹¹ Other liberal historians point to the growing interpenetration of journalism and politics in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when much of the press became an extension of the party system.¹² Indeed, the liberal historian Stephen Koss concludes that the British press did not become fully independent, and subject to popular control, until the late 1940s and 1950s.¹³

But if the Whig conception of the press as a fourth estate looks vulnerable, there is another interpretation waiting in the wings. In 1982, Brian Harrison wrote an erudite essay assessing the role of the pressure-group periodical in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He showed that these modest, and widely overlooked, publications helped to sustain pressure groups 'through three major functions: inspirational, informative and integrating'.¹⁴ They inspired some people to join or support a public-interest group; they armed activists with factual ammunition and strengthened their resolve; and they could build bridges, helping to unify reforming movements. By contributing to the functioning and effectiveness of pressure groups, the minority political press contributed to the development of a maturing democracy.

This is an important line of argument that can now be extended, with the help of more recent research, to the earlier period. The eighteenth-century press provided the oxygen of publicity for political campaigning centred on petitions, addresses, instructions (to MPs), public meetings and concerted demonstrations.¹⁵

These fostered a 'modern' style of politics based on public discussion and participation, rather than on personal relationships, clientelist networks and social deference. Sections of the press aided this new politics by conferring prominence on leading campaigners, by communicating their arguments and demands and by mobilising public support. They contributed in other words to building a democratic infrastructure of representation based on collective organisations.

In the nineteenth century, radical newspapers contributed to the growth of trade unions; reformist papers sustained a growing multiplicity of interest groups and a new, party-aligned press helped to transform aristocratic factions in parliament into mass political parties. This last development – often attracting disapproval from liberal press historians – represented a crucial contribution to the building of a key institution of democracy. Political parties became key co-ordinating organisations within the British political system: they aggregated social interests, formulated political programmes that distributed costs and redistributed resources across society and defined political choices for the electorate.¹⁶

A view of the press as an agency contributing to the building of civil society is subtly different from, and more persuasive than, a traditional conception of the press as the representative organ of public opinion. Arguments and evidence supporting this alternative interpretation are to be found in numerous radical¹⁷ as well as liberal accounts.¹⁸ These portray the press as contributing to the development of civil-society organisations *through which different publics were represented*. Implicitly, they also depict civil society rather than the press as the main locus of representation.

Mark Hampton has revised traditional liberal press history in another way. In a notable book, he documents the mid-Victorian elite vision of an *educative press* that would induct large numbers of people into 'politics by discussion'. This gave way, he shows, to growing disenchantment when newspapers became more commercial and sensational, and large numbers of people turned away from 'liberal' enlightenment. After 1880, the educational ideal was increasingly replaced by a view of the press as a representative institution – something that Hampton, drawing on radical press history, largely rejects.¹⁹

He has since written an essay that can be read as an account-settling epilogue to his book.²⁰ In effect, he concludes that *the twentieth-century press may not have measured up to the unreal expectations of Victorian visionaries, nor fulfilled the heroic destiny assigned to it in Whig history, yet neither should the press's democratic role be written off as an illusion*. There were times during the twentieth century – most notably during the South African War, at the onset of the Cold War in the 1940s and during the 1970s debate about economic management – when the British press offered multiple perspectives. This enriched public debate and manifestly contributed to the functioning of democracy.

Some liberal historians also argue that the educational mission of the press may have faltered, but it was absorbed by radio and television. The rise of public-service broadcasting, it is claimed, diminished the knowledge gap between elites and the general public; aided reciprocal communication between social groups; and fostered the development of a policy-based discourse of rational democratic debate, orientated towards the public good.²¹

One counter-charge to this is that public-service broadcasting was locked into a paternalistic style of journalism, a view that is in effect endorsed by Hugh Chignell.²² However, his contention is that BBC radio introduced more popular styles of journalism, particularly during the 1960s, in response to social change, competition and the possibilities created by new technology. This popularisation produced a furious reaction from elite critics, who were placated in the 1970s by the development of a more analytical, research-based form of journalism on BBC Radio 4. The implication of this study is that the BBC learned to develop different registers of journalism, which responded to the orientation of different audiences.

Liberal media historians have usually shrugged off criticism by ignoring it. Both Hampton and Chignell signify a change by registering and partly accepting critical arguments originating from outside the canon. In doing so, they are contributing to the development of a more guarded and persuasive liberal interpretation of media history.

Feminist challenge

The dominance of the liberal narrative is now challenged by the rise of feminist media history. This argues that the media did not become fully 'independent' when they became free of government, because they remained under male control. And far from empowering the people, the media contributed to the oppression of half the population. This feminist interpretation is thus not merely different from the liberal one but directly contradicts it.

It comes out of a historical tradition that documents the subordination of women in the early modern period, when wives, without ready access to divorce, could be lawfully beaten and confined by their husbands, and when women did not have the same social standing or legal rights as men. It describes the struggle for women's emancipation and advance as a qualified success story in which women gained new legal protections, greater independence and improved opportunities, but in a context where there is not yet full gender equality. Its account of the development of media history is told as an accompaniment to this narrative.

Feminist media history is now the fastest-growing version of media history. This return visit will thus focus attention on recent work that is revising the pioneer version of feminist media history.

This pioneer version argued that popular media indoctrinated women into accepting a subordinate position in society. It did this primarily by portraying men and women as having different social roles – men as breadwinners and participants in public life and women as mothers and housewives. As the *Ladies' Cabinet*, a leading women's journal, apostrophised in 1847: woman 'is given to man as his better angel ... to make home delightful and life joyous' and serve as a 'mother to make citizens for earth'.²³ This understanding of the proper role of women was justified in terms of the innate ('natural') differences between the sexes and, in the earlier period, by divine providence. During the course of the nineteenth century, this gender discourse was strengthened by being articulated to discourses of class and progress. Images of femininity were linked to those of affluent elegance, while understandings of domestic duty were associated with the moral improvement of

society. Traditional gender norms were upheld also by family custom, peer-group pressure and education, and rendered still more coercive by being reproduced in mass entertainment – including media produced specially for women.

This pioneer version also stressed the underlying continuity of patriarchal representations of gender from the nineteenth through to the late twentieth century. The main concerns of women were defined, according to this account, as courtship, marriage, motherhood, home-making and looking good. There were minor shifts of emphasis over the years (for example, a stress on being a professional housewife and mother in the 1930s, 'make do and mend' in the 1940s and 'shop and spend' in the 1950s). But the central media message remained, it is argued, essentially the same. Women's concerns were projected as being primarily romantic and domestic; men and women were depicted as being innately different; and women who transgressed gender norms were generally portrayed in an unfavourable light. The functionalist cast of this argument is typified by Janet Thumim's analysis of post-war film. 'Our exploration of popular films', she concludes, 'shows that screen representations in the period 1945–65 performed a consistently repressive function in respect of women. There are, simply, no depictions of autonomous, independent women either inside or outside the structure of the family, who survive unscathed at the narrative's close.'²⁴ Popular media, in short, consistently sustained patriarchy.

This stress on continuity is now being challenged within the feminist tradition. First, revisionist research is drawing attention to women's active resistance to patriarchal domination through the creation of their own media.²⁵ In particular, Michelle Tusan shows in a ground-breaking book that the women's press grew out of women's associations and single-issue campaigns in Victorian Britain. Originating in the 1850s, the women's press confounded Lord Northcliffe's observation that 'women can't write and don't want to read'²⁶ by gaining a significant readership before the First World War. Its leading publications reported news that was not covered in the mainstream press, developed women-centred political agendas and advanced alternative understandings of society. Even when the women's press was in decline during the 1920s, it still boasted the early *Time and Tide*, a weekly that published a satirical 'Man's Page' and thoughtful commentary by leading feminists from Virginia Woolf to Rebecca West. Eclipsed in the 1930s, the feminist press was reborn in the 1970s.

Second, increasing references are made to the advance of women within media organisations. Thus, David Deacon documents how female journalists, mostly from privileged backgrounds and with influential male patrons, made a breakthrough in the 1930s by breaching a traditional male preserve: the reporting of war. Even so, female journalists were still encouraged to concentrate on the everyday lives of ordinary people and to report war as an extended human-interest story.²⁷ Yet, by the 2000s, women had risen to positions of increasing prominence within the British media.²⁸

Third, revisionist research argues that representations of gender changed in meaningful ways in response to wider changes in society. Thus, Adrian Bingham attacks the standard view that the popular press sought to contain the advance of women during the interwar period.²⁹ A narrow focus on women's pages, he

argues, ignores the diversity of viewpoints that were expressed in the main body of popular daily papers. Although reactionary sentiments were sometimes voiced, the prevailing view expressed in the interwar press was that there should be no going back to the pre-war era. Women's increased freedom from restrictive social codes and dress was generally welcomed; successful women in public and professional life were depicted both prominently and positively; the greater independence, assertiveness and athleticism of 'modern women' was widely presented as being part of a generational change and an inevitable step towards greater gender convergence; there was an increased stress on the need for a companionate marriage and for an appropriate adjustment of traditional male behaviour; and women were invested, in a variety of ways, with greater prestige (not least as newly enfranchised citizens).

However, this scholarly study acknowledges that change was not unidirectional or across the board. Fashion, housewifery and motherhood still dominated women's pages. The women's movement was under-reported; feminism itself was frequently said to be outdated and 'superfluous'; and the Rothermere press opposed votes for women under thirty. Women were more often presented in sexualised ways, which had no counterpart for men. But although Bingham's assessment stresses complexity and diversity, his conclusion is that the interwar popular press adopted, overall, a more enlightened view of gender.

In passing, it should be noted that revisionists are not having it entirely their own way. Thus, Michael Bailey looks at radio's response to 'gender modernisation' during the same era as Bingham but reaches a significantly different conclusion. Like the press, the BBC also encouraged women to be efficient housewives and informed mothers during the interwar period. However, Bailey argues that the BBC's briefing was more than just helpful advice since, implicitly, it was also a way of making women internalise a sense of domestic duty and feel guilty if they fell short of the standards expected of 'modern women'. The BBC's domestic education is thus viewed by him as psychologically coercive and strongly traditionalist in reaffirming women's place in the home.³⁰

Fourth, revisionist research has drawn attention to the ambiguity or 'textual tension' of some media representations. This argument is not new and can be found in earlier studies of eighteenth-century ballads,³¹ nineteenth-century women's magazines,³² and twentieth-century women's films³³ – all media, it is argued, which sometimes provided a space in which women could imagine a different gender order or express a veiled form of protest. But while this argument is not original, it has become both more prominent and more explicitly linked to social change. For example, Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood draw attention to popular 1950s women's novels which featured women doctors.³⁴ These heroines were held up for admiration and were even portrayed as builders of a brave new world represented by the post-1945 welfare state. But they were also presented as being traditionally feminine, and their careers were implicitly viewed as being an extension of women's traditional caring role. These books, according to Philips and Haywood, were pleasurable because they offered a mythological resolution of conflicting impulses, one embracing change and the other harking back to the past.

Deborah Philips extends this argument in a subsequent study.³⁵ In her account, 1980s 'sex-and-shopping' novels celebrated women's advance, without questioning the structures of power that held back women. The 'Aga-saga' novels of the 1990s reverted to domesticated romance, while expressing unmistakable dissatisfaction with contemporary men. And some early 2000s 'chick-lit' novels depicted successful women in search of still more successful men. All these novels responded, according to Phillips, to contradictions in contemporary female sensibility.

Fifth, revisionist research points to a different denouement of the feminist narrative. Instead of arguing that media representations of gender remained fundamentally the same, the case is now being made more often that a cumulative sea change took place from the early 1980s onwards. A growing number of TV series – made or shown in Britain – depicted independent women with successful careers as being strong, capable and also appealing, indeed as people to identify with.³⁶ Teen magazines emerged that expressed female sexuality in new, more open ways.³⁷ However, some traditionalist representations of gender also persisted.³⁸ Depictions could also mislead by implying that gender equality had been achieved: indeed, as one analyst wryly notes, women in the fictional world of television have advanced further than women in real life.³⁹ Some seemingly 'progressive' lifestyle journalism also had conservative undertones, urging women to take control of their lives in individualistic ways rather than seeking to change society through collective action.⁴⁰ And some dramas like the cult series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) expressed conservative consumerist values, while also staging a debate about what women should expect out of life.⁴¹ Its success was emblematic of a more questioning media orientation towards gender relations at the turn of the century, compared with even twenty years before.

This feminist narrative, in its revised form, does not question the historical role of the media in socialising women into the norms of patriarchy. But the contours of this narrative, and its ending, are changing in response to new research. Historical work on the development of masculinity is also developing in a way that shadows, and supports, the feminist narrative.⁴² In short, a new way of viewing the media's evolution has come into being that takes account of one of the most important social developments of the last 150 years – the advance of women. It is leading to the rewriting of media history.

Radical challenge

The liberal tradition is also assailed from another direction. Radical media historians attack the same vulnerable point of the liberal narrative as feminist critics: its assumption that the media switched allegiances from government to the people when the media became 'free' of official control. Radical media history argues that, on the contrary, mainstream media remained integrated into the underlying power structure and continued to support the social order.⁴³

This version of media history comes primarily out of a historical account that records the rise of an organised working-class movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. This movement became more radical, won increasing support and developed its own popular press, which conferred publicity on working-class

institutions and radical causes and encouraged its readers to view society in more critical ways. But early working-class militants, and their heirs, were defeated. And, subsequently, the winning of equal citizenship, through mass enfranchisement, did not lead to the creation of an equal society.⁴⁴ Radical media history seeks to shed light on this by focusing on how, in its view, the media were 'tamed' even when they ceased to be government controlled.

In essence, its explanation boils down to three arguments. First, the market developed as a system of control (not as an engine of freedom, as in the liberal narrative). The rise of mass-market newspaper entry costs in the period 1850–1918 contributed to the consolidation of unrepresentative, capitalist control of the press (and also of the music hall and later film and television industries). The media's growing dependence on advertising also disadvantaged the left, while the development of media concentration curtailed choice.

Second, elites exerted influence on the media through informal processes. A modern apparatus of news management developed, beginning with the 'introduction' of the lobby system in 1885 and culminating in the enormous expansion of state public relations in the period after 1980. Informal alliances were forged between press controllers and governments, as during the Chamberlain and Thatcher eras. Above all, elites set the parameters of political debate in broadcasting through their ascendancy over state institutions, especially parliament.

Third, dominant groups also influenced the culture of society, and in this way shaped the content of the media. The prevailing ideas of the time – the intensification of nationalism in the eighteenth century, the rise of imperialism in the nineteenth century, the diffusion of anti-communism during the Cold War and the triumphalist neo-liberalism that followed – have tended to uphold, implicitly or explicitly, the prevailing social order.

This narrative has been usefully synthesised in a recent essay.⁴⁵ And it continues to be embellished by new research. Examples include a study of the radical press during its triumphant Chartist phase;⁴⁶ an illuminating study of the role of the media in the transformation of Queen Victoria into the 'Mother of her People' and symbol of imperial and industrial greatness;⁴⁷ and a radical, Foucauldian analysis of how the BBC sought to 'train and reform the unemployed as docile but efficient citizens' during the 1930s.⁴⁸

This historical tradition has unstitched the more vulnerable seams of traditional liberal history. It also makes an insightful contribution to a historical understanding of why socialism was defeated in Britain. But it suffers from one central defect: its failure to acknowledge that the reformist heirs of the early working-class movement succeeded in the twentieth century in changing significantly the social order. Moreover, a progressive alliance did so partly as a consequence of securing an extensive hearing – even support – from part of the media system. Misleading arguments about the 'refeudalisation of society' after 1850, linked to a very simplistic sketch of a subordinated media system, as in Jürgen Habermas' classic radical account,⁴⁹ no longer seem satisfactory – even to the author himself.⁵⁰ In short, the traditional radical narrative needs to pay more attention to political success rather than to failure and to the media's involvement in progressive change. To this, we shall return.

Populist challenge

The populist interpretation of media history describes the development of the media as a prolonged escape story – not from government but from a cultural elite which once controlled the media and which sought to foist its taste and cultural judgements on the people. It recounts how the public demanded entertainment in place of uplift, and largely prevailed as a consequence of the increasing commercialisation of the media.

This interpretation connects to two themes in the general history of Britain. Its description of a revolt against a cultural elite is part of a more general account of the erosion of deference to authority (whether based on birth, wealth, age, education or occupation). And its celebration of the ‘egalitarian’ power of the media consumer connects to a more general narrative that describes the rise of a consumer society and the alleged subversion of class authority by consumer power.

The core of this media narrative is provided by specialist studies that record the triumphs of the entertainment-seeking public over high-minded Victorian elites and their heirs: registered for example in the advent of the ‘new journalism’ in the 1880s, the stocking of light fiction in Edwardian public libraries, the expansion of popular music on 1940s and 1960s radio and the cumulative popularisation of television. This narrative has as a subsidiary theme an historical account of the pleasure people derived from the media.

New studies continue to fill out this narrative. Thus a recent study of the rise of a consumer society in nineteenth-century Britain portrays the growth of popular journalism as part of an efflorescence of ‘bright colour, light and entertainment’ in which life became more fun, fuller and richer – enhanced by the retail revolution and the rise of football, mass tourism, bestselling books and the music hall.⁵¹

Similarly, another populist study argues that the expansion of popular music through the gramophone, radio and dance hall immeasurably improved the quality of life in interwar Britain, just as cheap food, electricity and better housing did. The enormous pleasure derived from popular music was allegedly a direct consequence of its commercialisation. ‘In an important sense’, writes James Nott, ‘the application of the profit motive to cultural production was democratic.’⁵² It meant that music was directed towards what people wanted, rather than what disapproving – and sometimes snobbish and racist – cultural gatekeepers thought was worthy. Nott also argues that commercial popular music during this period had vitality, affirmed the ordinary, connected to popular romanticism and produced sounds and songs that have lasted.

Likewise, Jeffrey Millard contrasts the patrician and paternalistic sentiments of those who shaped the development of a public-service broadcasting regime (including commercial television) in the 1950s and 1960s with the opportunities for pleasurable fulfilment created by multiple digital television channels and video-on-demand in the twenty-first century.⁵³ This interpretative strand of media history also continues to generate celebrations of popular media content, as connected to the real, lived experiences of ordinary people.⁵⁴

The populist tradition of media history has limitations, and is not the dynamic force that it was during neo-liberalism’s heyday. It does not evaluate how the rise of entertainment impinged on the democratic role of the media. It mistakenly equates

consumer and civic equality with social and economic equality. And it fails to engage adequately with issues of cultural quality. Even so, it has illuminated greatly the life-enhancing pleasures generated by the rise of the media.

Nation building

The liberal, feminist, radical and populist traditions belong recognisably to the same intellectual family. They recount media history in relation to different forms of power – political, economic and social/cultural. They also intersect, overlap and confront each other in ways that indicate a troubled relationship of affinity. However, there are three other established narratives which have only a tangential relationship to this core of media history. But what they have to say is important.

The 'anthropological' narrative is inspired by the insight that the nation is partly a cultural construct and explores the role of the media in fostering an imaginary sense of national communion. The UK is in fact a relatively 'new' nation: created formally (though there had been a historical build-up) through the political union of England and Wales with Scotland in 1707 and the constitutional union of Britain and Ireland in 1801 (followed by a messy divorce with most of Ireland in 1921). The emergent media system, it is argued, played a significant part in bonding this conglomerate of nations and forging a sense of being 'British'.

Thus, print media helped to foster a British national identity in the eighteenth century principally through Protestant bigotry and antagonism towards Catholic France (with whom Britain was at war for much of the century).⁵⁵ This became overlaid in the nineteenth century by a sense of imperial superiority, expressed in a hubristic view of national character, and in the first half of the twentieth century by widely diffused images of Britain as an Arcadia.⁵⁶ However, the decline of Protestantism and the dismantlement of the empire after 1945 undermined the traditional conception of Britishness, while conventional visualisations of Britain as an unchanging Constable painting did not accord with a new stress on modernity. With difficulty, and still in a contested form, a weaker national identity emerged after 1970, a time when the UK joined the EEC (1973) and was exposed to increased globalising influences. This took the form of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, plural understanding of Britishness. Thus, the optimistic claim is that British national identity, forged originally through religious hatred and racist imperialism, evolved to include people of all religions and none and to embrace people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Recent research has extended this relatively new narrative, giving it greater depth and fine-grained detail. For example, James Chapman's examination of British historical films between the 1930s and 1990s argues persuasively that these films say as much about the time they were made as about the past.⁵⁷ Among other things, his study draws attention to a deepening sense of national decline during the 1950s. Richard Weight's study of patriotism between 1940 and 2000 is especially illuminating about the attempt, with strong press support, to reverse this sense of national decline during the 1980s through the projection of Britain as a recuperated nation, the victor of the short, exciting Falklands War, and further regenerated through a return to traditional values (with an implied single ethnicity).⁵⁸ This failed to

capture permanently the national imagination, Weight argues, and gave way by the 1990s to a looser, more inclusive and multiple understanding of Britishness. However, a sense of being British has always been mediated through other identities, such as class, gender, region and membership of the nations of Scotland, Wales and Ulster. As Paul Ward argues, there is an underlying continuity in the fractured and mediated nature of British national identity between 1870 and the present.⁵⁹

But if recent research extends existing lines of argument, it also offers a new twist by giving more critical attention to identification with the 'national regions'. This reorientation has given rise to ground-breaking research into Englishness. Richard Colls argues that a sense of Englishness was buried inside the mythologising of the 'Anglo-British imperial state', and came to be viewed as synonymous with Britishness. But this equation of England and Britain was undermined first by the death of imperialism (a project in which all countries of the UK had a shared investment) and then by political devolution. However, the English found difficulty in expressing their sub-national identity partly because readily available images of England were so outdated. As Richard Colls eloquently puts it, 'island races, garden hearts, industrial landscapes, ecclesiological villages, fixed properties, ordered relationships, native peoples, cultural survivals, northern grit, southern charm, rural redemption, rule Britannia – all these discourses persist, but with less conviction'.⁶⁰ This portrait of 'Englishness' as a buried, inarticulate sense of commonality accords with Krishan Kumar's subsequent study, which argues that an English identity was deliberately repressed for the sake of imperial and national unity (with clear parallels to the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires).⁶¹

Historical exploration of Englishness has been accompanied by renewed interest in Welsh and Scots national identity (and a boom in good, revisionist books about Irish nationalism that lies outside this review). Especially notable is a study of the media in Wales.⁶² The Welsh region of the BBC (radio) was established in 1937; a Welsh ITV company in 1958; a unified Welsh BBC television service in 1964; and the Welsh television channel, Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C), in 1982. All these initiatives came about partly as a consequence of Welsh nationalist pressure and helped to sustain a distinctive Welsh identity. S4C played an especially important role in supporting the declining Welsh language (which is now spoken by only 20 per cent of Welsh people).

But these developments should not obscure the extent of national (and predominantly English) domination of Britain's media system. Barlow and associates point out that, in 2002, 85 per cent of daily morning papers bought in Wales came from across the border.⁶³ In 2003, less than 10 per cent of the output of BBC1 and 2 and ITV1 (HTV) was produced specifically for Welsh consumption, and much of this was accounted for by news.⁶⁴ While emphasising the complex factors in play in sustaining rival national identities, this study highlights just how important the national integration of the UK's media system has been in supporting an overarching British national identity.

The increased attention given to 'regional nationalism' is thus an important feature of the way in which the anthropological narrative is developing.⁶⁵ This is partly a response to the revival of separatism and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly in 1999.

Culture wars

The libertarian media narrative arises from different developments in British society. There was a sustained decline of religious belief and observance from the later nineteenth century onwards. The increasing de-Christianisation of Britain, combined with greater individualism fostered by capitalism, contributed to the advance of social liberalism in the 1960s. This was fiercely resisted by traditionalists, who sought to turn the clock back. The battle between social conservatives and social liberals that ensued provides the central theme of the libertarian narrative for the second half of the twentieth century.

The best-documented part of this narrative is provided by research into the social reaction that took place against 1960s social liberalism. This highlights the role of the media in generating moral panics about a succession of deviant groups from the 1960s through to the 1980s. The media presented these groups in stereotypical and exaggerated ways; represented them to be part of a deeper social malaise; mobilised support for authoritarian retribution; and recharged in varied ways social conservatism.⁶⁶

Recent work, within the libertarian narrative, updates this narrative and offers a different provisional ending. Thus, one study examines the emergence of a new kind of left in municipal politics – owing more to the Sixties counter-culture than to Marxism or Methodism – which was symbolically annihilated in the media during the 1980s. Yet, its political agenda and some of its once controversial policies became almost mainstream in the early 2000s, when the Sixties generation gained control of leading public institutions. This outcome ‘was because in Britain – unlike America – progressives were winning major battles in an unacknowledged culture war’.⁶⁷

If this study suggests that the tide of social reaction receded after the 1980s (though this did not extend to issues arising from immigration and terrorism during the early 2000s), another survey reappraises the concept of moral panic, the *deus ex machina* of the radical libertarian narrative. Chas Critcher argues that some moral panics were prevented through opposition and expert intervention (as in the 1980s, over AIDS); some were deflected from authoritarian control towards harm minimisation (as in the 1990s, over raves and ecstasy); and some led to ritualistic illusions of effective action (as when the complexities of child abuse were reduced, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to a hue and cry against ‘stranger paedophiles’). The concept of moral panic, concludes Critcher, is an ‘ideal type’ which, in reality, takes different forms and has different outcomes.⁶⁸ This is a significantly different position from the depiction of the moral panic as a mechanism for the reassertion of the ‘control culture’ that featured in his earlier, co-authored work.⁶⁹

The libertarian narrative exists only in embryonic form and is in need of more work and clearer definition. However, one can obtain a glimpse of how it can be projected back in time through research into media representations of ‘out’ groups. These helped to establish boundaries delineating what was acceptable.

During the 1880s, the press supported an outcry against gay men (accompanied by the strengthening of penal legislation), followed by a comparable crusade against lesbians in the 1920s. Representations of sexual minorities continued to be strongly

hostile until there was a softening of media homophobia in the 1960s (accompanied by the partial decriminalisation of gay sex). Even so, gay people were often presented on British television in the 1970s as being either silly or threatening. The 1980s witnessed a dichotomisation in TV drama: positive portrayals of gay men tended to be confined to those who appeared reassuringly asexual, while the sexualised were more often projected in strongly negative ways. It was only at the turn of the century that gay people were more often featured as 'ordinary'.⁷⁰ The symbolic turning point was the British TV series *Queer As Folk* (1999–2000), a soap opera set in Manchester's gay village. It portrayed, in bright primary colours, a young generation of gay men as intelligent, attractive, heterogeneous and 'normal': free of shame or concealment and relatively untouched by the stigmata of traditional celluloid representation. The perspective of the series' narrative, the gaze of its camera, even its sex scenes, normalised rather than pathologised being gay. It marked a milestone of social change, followed by legislation in the early 2000s that ended some forms of continuing discrimination against gays and lesbians.

Another way in which the libertarian narrative can be extended over time is through studies of moral regulation of the media. There was draconian censorship in the first half of the twentieth century (especially in relation to sex, morality and bad language) but this tended to diminish overall during the second half.

Technological determinism

The last of the alternative interpretations of media history, technological determinism, transcends national frontiers and represents a proposed 'master narrative'. Instead of seeing the media as linked to change, it portrays the media – or rather communications technology – as being the origin and fount of change.

There are a number of classic studies advancing this position. Harold Innis argues that each new medium of communication changed the organisation of society by altering dimensions of time and space.⁷¹ Elizabeth Eisenstein maintains that the printing press contributed to cultural advance in early modern Europe by preserving and making more widely available the intellectual achievements of the past.⁷² Marshall McLuhan claims that electronic media fostered a 'retribalised', syncretic culture by re-engaging simultaneously the human senses.⁷³ Joshua Meyrowitz argues that the universality of television changed social relations by demystifying the 'other'.⁷⁴

This tradition is now being renewed through accounts which argue that the Internet is fundamentally changing the world. The Internet, we are told, is 'blowing to bits' traditional business strategy;⁷⁵ rejuvenating democracy;⁷⁶ empowering the people;⁷⁷ inaugurating a new era of global enlightenment;⁷⁸ transforming human sensibility;⁷⁹ rebuilding community;⁸⁰ generating a self-expressive culture,⁸¹ and undermining, with interactive television, established media empires.⁸²

There is only sufficient space here to register briefly two points in relation to these studies. A review of the evidence strongly suggests that the offline world influences the online world – in particular its content and use – more than the other way around. However, this should not lead us to accept a social determinist position, the mirror opposite of technological determinism, which is now gaining

ground. This last sees the Internet – and by implications all new communications technology – as merely an extension of society reproducing, in a closed loop, its culture and social relations. This misses the point that the specific attributes of internet technology (its international reach, cheapness, interactivity and hypertextuality) make a difference. Social determinism also tends to present society as a simplifying abstraction, instead of investigating the ways in which the architecture, content, use and influence of the Internet have been shaped by interacting and contending forces within society that have evolved and changed over time.⁸³

Wider issues in relation to the development of new media continue to be explored. For example, Paddy Scannell makes an eloquent case that communications technology has built a better world, though most of his essay is about technology in general (from the atomic bomb to washing machines) and is therefore utterly irrelevant to a discussion of media development.⁸⁴ Graham Murdock and Michael Pickering address one aspect of the modernist thesis, arguing that the telegraph and photography have not automatically promoted communication and understanding through killing distance: in fact, they have been misused to extend control and to impede understanding through objectification.⁸⁵ In a similar vein, Menahem Blondheim argues that the starting point of many influential technodeterminist accounts – their view of communications technology as autonomous – is misleading.⁸⁶

Technological determinist media history, based on the argument that new media technologies have transformed society in successive waves, has been highly influential. But it has limitations and is in need of academic revision.

Lost narratives

Where does this leave us? The obvious next step is to construct alternative syntheses of the seven narratives in a battle of meta-narratives. However, rather than recapitulate my own outline version,⁸⁷ it is perhaps more useful to reflect upon what has been left out of this review.

I set about writing my original essay, after some initial difficulty, by listing on a sheet of paper key trends in British history and then reflecting upon what the available media-historical literature said in relation to each of these. Some trends I had to omit because there was no relevant media historical research to sustain a 'narrative'. The six trends that survived this winnowing process were: (1) national unification; (2) mass democracy; (3) defeat of socialism; (4) advance of women; (5) rise of consumer society; and (6) decline of religion/moral traditionalism.

But this leaves out important developments in the history of Britain in which the media played a part. It is worth drawing attention to four 'lost narratives', in particular, which failed to make the shortlist. They merit further investigation.

The most glaring omission is the building of the welfare state, linked to a 'reformist' narrative of media development. Adapting rather freely a celebrated essay by the social democratic theorist T. H. Marshall⁸⁸ it is possible to see British history as an evolving, collective struggle for securing human rights: civil rights (notably the right to assembly and equal justice), political rights (the right to vote), social rights (including access to free health care and social security) and cultural rights

(including access to 'cultural privilege', public-affairs information and symbolic representation). The first of these two struggles had been largely (but not wholly) won by 1918. The period from 1918 to the present marked the intensification of the collective battle for social and cultural entitlements. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advances in social welfare were greatly extended in the 1940s to include state protection 'from the cradle to the grave'. In the cultural sphere, nineteenth-century advances – free elementary schools, public libraries, parks, museums and galleries – were extended in the next century through the expansion of free education, public-service broadcasting, creative arts subsidies and the creation of the *free* World Wide Web.

This historical perspective bears some resemblance to that proposed by Graham Murdock.⁸⁹ Ross McKibbin's fine study is a key source for this narrative, showing the way in which a solidaristic working-class culture, supported by popular entertainment, reached its zenith of confidence and influence in the 1940s.⁹⁰ Elements of this narrative are to be found in a study by James Curran and Jean Seaton, which dwells, in three chapters, on the 1940s, a time when much of the media system (including a radicalised section of the wartime press) contributed to building a consensus in favour of a consolidated welfare state.⁹¹ This study also differentiates between the positive role of public-service broadcasting (including *regulated* commercial TV) and of the web, and the negative role of a debased press – a theme partly shared with other histories.⁹² This critical celebration of public-service broadcasting is supported by other studies documenting the development of innovative public-service TV journalism;⁹³ the BBC's struggle to defend public-service virtues under siege;⁹⁴ public-service TV's extension of symbolic representation in the second half of the twentieth century;⁹⁵ and, of course, Asa Briggs' (1961–85) history of the BBC.⁹⁶ More generally, there is a strong historical tradition of policy analysis that examines successful and failed attempts to reform the media and to resist neo-liberal transformation (although some of these authors would object vehemently to being characterised as 'reformist' historians).⁹⁷ There are rich secondary materials available for the development of a reformist media history, especially in the twentieth century. But these are currently too fragmented, and more importantly their perspectives are too internally divided, for this proto-history to make it into the 'canon' of established media-historical narratives. But there is a gap here that needs to be filled.

The second missing dimension is a narrative that describes the distributional battles between social classes in terms of power, status and material rewards, and describes the evolving role of the media in relation to these. Surveying the last two centuries, there have been two major losers: the aristocracy, which used to rule Britain (but does so no longer), and the working class, which was once a powerful political, economic and cultural force but which has now contracted, subdivided and in important respects lost ground. The great victors have been key sectors of the bourgeoisie best adapted to the globalising economy. A class media narrative can be constructed for the nineteenth century, but – because of the present state of research and shifting fashion – it loses coherence by the later twentieth century. In essence, this would be a more ambitious version of the radical narrative we have now.

The third lost dimension is the rise of the British economy (and associated gains in living standards and job creation) paired with an economic history of the British media. Britain became the 'first industrial nation', was overtaken by the US and then evolved into a service-based economy. This seems to have parallels with the development of British media. Imperial Britain played a key role in the development of telegraph technology and of news agencies. But it was the US, not Britain, which pioneered industrialised, mass journalism, while Hollywood locked horns with, and defeated, the British film industry by 1910. Britain failed also to capitalise on the construction of a pioneer digital computer in 1944 and its prominent role in the development of packet-switching network technology during the 1960s. Yet, Britain became (and remains) the second biggest exporter of TV programmes in the world. Whether there are links between the successes and failures of the British economy and of the British creative industries would be an interesting avenue to explore. Stefan Schwarzkopf has made a pioneer contribution to this potential 'narrative' by examining the American take-over of much of the British advertising industry, at a time when many British agencies were slow to respond to the rise of commercial television.⁹⁸

A fourth theme was half in, and half out of, my review. This featured a technological determinist view of new communications technology in a supranational context. It was not possible to present an alternative version of this perspective in a UK context, given the existing nature of research. Good work has been done in this general area, but primarily limited to researching influences shaping communications technology and mostly in other countries.⁹⁹ But it would be interesting to develop a national account of how new communications technology changed British politics, culture and social relations.

Retrospect

In short, what I came up with was necessarily highly selective. It offered only a partial account, dictated by what was available rather than what was needed. But, hopefully, its portrayal of how the media contributed to the making of modern Britain – as a series of competing narratives – will provoke further discussion and serve as an antidote to the narrowness of too much media history.¹⁰⁰

Of course, specialist studies provide the essential building blocks of all areas of enquiry. But it is also important to advance a tradition of media history that seeks ambitiously to situate historical investigation of the media in a wider societal context. In due course, this approach should widen the context still further through comparative research.¹⁰¹