CHAPTER 8

Political Culture and the Media

'Mankind, in general, judge more by their eyes than their hands; for all can see the appearance, but few can touch the reality.'

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince* (1532)

PREVIEW

Much of politics takes place in our heads; that is, it is shaped by our ideas, values and assumptions about how society should be organized, and our expectations, hopes and fears about government. Ultimately, what we believe about the society in which we live may be more important than the reality of its power structure, and the actual distribution of resources and opportunities within it. Perception may not only be more important than reality; in practical terms, perception may *be* reality. This highlights the vital role played by what is called 'political culture'. People's beliefs, symbols and values structure both their attitude to the political process and, crucially, their view of the regime in which they live. However, there is significant disagreement about the nature and role of the political culture, not least over whether it sustains democracy or is aligned with the interests of dominant groups. Others have highlighted concerns about the political culture's (apparently) declining capacity to foster civic engagement and a sense of social belonging. The issue of the political culture also draws attention to the extent to which the politics of modern societies is conducted through the media – newspapers, television, the internet, mobile phones and so on. The media constitute much more than a channel of communications; they are part of the political process itself, affecting, and not merely reflecting, the distribution of power in society at large. Long-standing debate about the media's relationship with democracy and styles of governance have been given a fresh twist by the advent of electronic-based 'new' media, while media influence generally has been associated with a growing emphasis in politics on 'news managment' and so-called 'spin'.

KEY ISSUES

- How do individuals and groups acquire their political attitudes and values?
- Do democratic regimes depend on the existence of a distinctive 'civic culture'?
- Are modern societies characterized by free competition between values and ideas, or by a 'dominant' culture?
- To what extent do the media shape political attitudes?
- How do the media affect the distribution of political power?
- Is the politics of 'spin' inevitable in the media age?

CONCEPT

Political culture

Culture, in its broadest sense, is the way of life of a people. Sociologists and anthropologists tend to distinguish between 'culture' and 'nature', the former encompassing that which is passed on from one generation to the next by learning, rather than through biological inheritance. Political scientists, however, use the term in a narrower sense to refer to a people's psychological orientation, political culture being the 'pattern of orientations' to political objects such as parties, government, the constitution, expressed in beliefs, symbols and values. Political culture differs from public opinion in that it is fashioned out of long-term values rather than simply people's reactions to specific policies and problems.

POLITICAL CULTURE

Political thinkers through the ages have acknowledged the importance of attitudes, values and beliefs. However, these past thinkers did not see them as part of a 'political culture'. Burke (see p. 36), for instance, wrote about custom and tradition, Marx (see p. 41) about ideology, and Herder (see p. 110) about national spirit. All of them, nevertheless, agreed about the vital role that values and beliefs play in promoting the stability and survival of a regime. Interest amongst political scientists in the idea of political culture emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as new techniques of behavioural analysis displaced more traditional, institutional approaches to the subject. The classic work in this respect was Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963), which used opinion surveys to analyse political attitudes and democracy in five countries: the USA, the UK, West Germany, Italy and Mexico. This work was stimulated, in part, by a desire to explain the collapse of representative government in interwar Italy, Germany and elsewhere, and the failure of democracy in many newly-independent developing states after 1945. Although interest in political culture faded in the 1970s and 1980s, the debate has been revitalized since the 1990s as a result of efforts in Eastern Europe to construct democracy out of the ashes of communism, and growing anxiety in mature democracies, such as the USA, about the apparent decline of social capital (see p. 175) and civic engagement. However, there is also debate about whether or not political culture is shaped by the ideas and interests of elite groups. This, in turn, is linked to rival views of the mass media (see p. 179) and the extent to which government can now manipulate political communication, considered later in the chapter.

Civic culture or ideological hegemony?

Debate about the nature of political culture has often focused on the idea of **civic culture**, usually associated with the writings of Almond and Verba (1963, 1980). Almond and Verba set out to identify the political culture that most effectively upheld democratic politics. They identified three general types of political culture:

- A *participant* political culture. This is one in which citizens pay close attention to politics, and regard popular participation as both desirable and effective.
- A *subject* political culture. This is characterized by more passivity amongst citizens, and the recognition that they have only a very limited capacity to influence government.
- A *parochial* political culture. This is marked by the absence of a sense of citizenship, with people identifying with their locality, rather than the nation, and having neither the desire nor the ability to participate in politics.

● **Civic culture**: A set of specific attitudes which are crucial to the success of modern democracies.

Although Almond and Verba accepted that a participant culture came closest to the democratic ideal, they argued that the 'civic culture' is a blend of all three, in that it reconciles the participation of citizens in the political process with the vital necessity for government to govern. Democratic stability, in their view, is

underpinned by a political culture that is characterized by a blend of activity and passivity on the part of citizens, and a balance between obligation and performance on the part of government.

In their initial study (1963), Almond and Verba concluded that the UK came closest to the civic culture, exhibiting both participant and subject features. In other words, while the British thought that they could influence government, they were also willing to obey authority. The USA also scored highly, its relative weakness being that, as participant attitudes predominated over subject ones, Americans were not particularly law-abiding. The difficulty of building or rebuilding a civic culture was underlined by the examples of both West Germany and Italy. By the early 1960s, neither country appeared to have a strong participant culture; while the subject culture was dominant in Germany, parochial attitudes remained firmly entrenched in Italy. Almond and Verba's later study (1980) highlighted a number of shifts, notably declining national pride and confidence in the UK and the USA, which contrasted with a rise in civic propensities in Germany.

The civic-culture approach to the study of political attitudes and values has, however, been widely criticized. In the first place, its model of the psychological dispositions that make for a stable democracy is highly questionable. In particular, the emphasis on passivity and the recognition that deference to authority is healthy has been criticized by those who argue that political participation (see p. 444) is the very stuff of democratic government. Almond and Verba suggested a 'sleeping dogs' theory of democratic culture that implies that low participation indicates broad satisfaction with government, which politicians, in turn, will be anxious to maintain. On the other hand, when less than half the adult population bothers to vote, as regularly occurs in the USA, this could simply reflect widespread alienation and ingrained disadvantage. (The link between declining participation rates and the health of the political system is discussed in greater detail in Chpater 20.)

Second, the civic-culture thesis rests on the unproven assumption that political attitudes and values shape behaviour, and not the other way round. In short, a civic culture may be more a consequence of democracy than its cause. If this is the case, political culture may provide an index of the health of democracy, but it cannot be seen as a means of promoting stable democratic rule. Finally, Almond and Verba's approach tends to treat political culture as homogeneous; that is, as little more than a cipher for national culture or national character. In so doing, it pays little attention to political subcultures and tends to disguise fragmentation and social conflict. In contrast, radical approaches to political culture tend to highlight the significance of social divisions, such as those based on class, race and gender (see Chapter 7).

A very different view of the role and nature of political culture has been developed within the Marxist tradition. Although Marx portrayed capitalism as a system of class exploitation and oppression operating through the ownership of the means of production, he also acknowledged the power of ideas, values and beliefs. As Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology* ([1846]1970), 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time the ruling *intellectual* force'. In Marx's view, ideas and culture are part of a 'superstructure' that is conditioned or determined by the economic 'base', the mode of production.

CONCEPT

Hegemony

Hegemony (from the Greek *hegemonia*, meaning 'leader') is, in its simplest sense, the ascendancy or domination of one element of a system over others. In Marxist theory, the term is used in a more specific sense. In the writings of Gramsci (see p. 175), hegemony refers to the ability of a dominant class to exercise power by winning the consent of those it subjugates, as an alternative to the use of coercion. As a non-coercive form of class rule, hegemony typically operates through the dissemination of bourgeois values and beliefs throughout society.

These ideas have provided Marxism with two theories of culture. The first suggests that culture is essentially class-specific: as members of a class share the same experiences and have a common economic position and interests, they are likely to have broadly similar ideas, values and beliefs. In Marx's words, 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness'. Proletarian culture and ideas can therefore be expected to differ markedly from bourgeois ones. The second theory of culture emphasizes the degree to which the ideas of the ruling class (what Marx referred to as 'ideology') pervade society and become the 'ruling ideas' of the age. In this view, political culture, or even civic culture, is thus nothing more than **bourgeois ideology**. What is important about this view is that it sees culture, values and beliefs as a form of power. From the Marxist perspective, the function of ideology is to reconcile subordinate classes to their exploitation and oppression by propagating myths, delusions and falsehoods (in Engels' words, 'false consciousness'). Later Marxists have understood this process in terms of bourgeois 'hegemony'.

Modern Marxists have been quick to acknowledge that, in no sense, do the 'ruling ideas' of the bourgeoisie monopolize intellectual and cultural life in a capitalist society, excluding all rival views. Rather, they accept that cultural, ideological and political competition does exist, but stress that this competition is unequal. Quite simply, ideas and values that uphold the capitalist order have an overwhelming advantage over ideas and values that question or challenge it. Such ideological hegemony may, in fact, be successful precisely because it operates behind the illusion of free speech, open competition and political pluralism – what Herbert Marcuse (see p. 42) termed 'repressive tolerance'.

The most influential twentieth-century exponent of this view was Antonio Gramsci (see p. 175). Gramsci drew attention to the degree to which the class system is upheld not simply by unequal economic and political power, but also by bourgeois hegemony. This consists of the spiritual and cultural supremacy of the ruling class, brought about through the spread of bourgeois values and beliefs via 'civil society'; the mass media, the churches, youth movements, trade unions and so forth. What makes this process so insidious is that it extends beyond formal learning and education into the very common sense of the age. The significance of Gramsci's analysis is that, in order for socialism to be achieved, a 'battle of ideas' has to be waged through which proletarian principles, values and theories displace, or at least challenge, bourgeois ideas.

The Marxist view of culture as ideological power rests on the distinction between subjective or *felt* interests (what people think they want) and objective or *real* interests (what people would want if they could make independent and informed choices). This draws attention to what Stephen Lukes (2004) called a 'radical view of power' (see p. 9): '*A* exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests'. Such a view of political culture has, however, attracted considerable criticism. Some have argued that it is unwarrantedly patronizing to suggest that the values and beliefs of ordinary people have been foisted upon them by manipulation and indoctrination. The acceptance of capitalist values and beliefs by the working classes may, for instance, merely reflect their perception that capitalism works.

The dominant-ideology model of political culture may also overstate the degree of homogeneity in the values and beliefs of modern societies. While a

● **Bourgeois ideology**: A Marxist term, denoting ideas and theories that serve the interests of the bourgeoisie by disguising the contradictions of capitalist society.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

Italian Marxist and social theorist. The son of a minor public official. Gramsci joined the Socialist Party in 1913, and in 1921 became the General Secretary of the newly-formed Italian Communist Party. Although an elected member of parliament, he was imprisoned by Mussolini in 1926. He remained in prison until his death. His *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971), written in 1929–35, tried to counterbalance the emphasis within orthodox Marxism on 'scientific' determinism by stressing the importance of the political and intellectual struggle. Although proponents of Eurocommunism have claimed him as an influence, he remained throughout his life a Leninist and a revolutionary.

CONCEPT

Social capital

The concept of social capital was developed in the 1970s to highlight the social and cultural factors that underpin wealth creation. The term has since been used to refer to social connectiveness, as represented by networks, norms and trust that promote civic engagement. In common with economic assets, social capital can decline or rise, usually through education and a stress on active citizenship. The alleged decline in social capital in modern society has been linked, variously, to the 'parenting deficit', the rise of individualism and the increase in social and geographical mobility.

'ruling' ideology may provide a dominant class with self-belief and a sense of purpose, it is less clear, as Abercrombie *et al.*, (1980) argued, that subordinate classes have been successfully integrated into this value system. Finally, the Marxist view, which purports to establish a link between unequal class power and cultural and ideological bias, may do nothing more than describe a tendency found in all societies for powerful groups to propagate self-serving ideas. Whether this constitutes a dominant value *system*, in which a coherent and consistent message is disseminated through the media, schools, the churches and so on, is rather more questionable.

Decline of social capital?

The process of political and economic reconstruction in former communist states has stimulated renewed interest in the issue of political culture since the 1990s. This is because pervasive state control over a number of generations had evidently destroyed or suppressed the social connections and sense of civic responsibility that usually sustain democratic politics. In other words, there was a perceived need to rebuild civil society (see p. 6), in the sense of a realm of autonomous groups and associations, including businesses, interest groups, clubs and so on. Indeed, such ideas can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville (see p. 245), who, in the nineteenth century, had explained the USA's egalitarian institutions and democratic practices by reference to the American's propensity for participation and civic association. No sooner had this revived concern with political culture arisen in relation to postcommunist states than it was being applied to perceived problems in mature democracies.

Robert Putnam (see p. 176), for example, argued that variations in the quality of local government in different regions of Italy were determined by the presence, or absence, of traditions of civic engagement, reflected in differing levels of voter turnout, newspaper readership, and membership of choral societies and football clubs. In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam drew attention to the USA's declining 'social capital', and argued that other industrialized countries are likely to follow US trends. He highlighted the emergence of a 'post-civic' generation. This was demonstrated by a 25–50 per cent drop in the number of voluntary

Robert D. Putnam (born 1941)

US political scientist and social commentator. Putnam's work has revived interest in civil society and focused attention on the importance of 'social capital': the social networks in a society that build trust and cooperation and develop'the "I" into the "we"'. His most influential work, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), used the image of a man bowling alone, rather than in a team, to illustrate the decline of community activity and political engagement in the USA. Amongst the causes of this decline, Putnam identifies the growing influence of television, two-career families and longer commutes. His other works include *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Italy* (1993).

CONCEPT

Communitarianism

Communitarianism is the belief that the self or person is constituted through the community, in the sense that individuals are shaped by the communities to which they belong and thus owe them a debt of respect and consideration. *Left-wing* communitarians hold that community demands unrestricted freedom and social equality. *Centrist* communitarians hold that community is grounded in reciprocal rights and responsibilities. *Right-wing* communitarians hold that community requires respect for authority and established values.

clubs and associations since 1965, and by sharp declines in attendance at public, town and school meetings, as well as in the membership of, and work done for, political parties. Putnam's view, which is influenced by communitarianism, explains declining social capital in a variety of ways. These include the spread of suburbanization and, therefore, of longer journeys to work; the rise of two-career families and their impact on the quantity and quality of parenting; and the tendency of television to privatize leisure time, misshape social perceptions and reduce achievement levels in children. From an alternative social-democratic perspective, however, the decline of civic engagement is explained by the triumph of consumer capitalism and the spread of materialist and individualist values.

Conservative thinkers have long supported their own view of social capital in the form of tradition (see p. 82) and, in particular, 'traditional values'. These are values and beliefs that have supposedly been passed down from earlier generations and so constitute a kind of cultural bedrock. Conservative politicians regularly call for such values to be 'strengthened' or 'defended', believing that they are the key to social cohesion and political stability. In the UK in the 1980s, for example, Margaret Thatcher called for the resurrection of what she called 'Victorian values', while John Major's ill-starred 'Back to Basics' initiative attempted much the same in the 1990s. In the USA, Ronald Reagan embraced the notion of the 'frontier ideology', harking back to the conquest of the American West and the virtues of self-reliance, hard work and adventurousness that he believed it exemplified. Not uncommonly, such values are linked to the family, the church and the nation; that is, to long-established institutions that supposedly embody the virtues of continuity and endurance.

In his essay 'Rationalism in Politics', Michael Oakeshott (1962) developed a further defence of continuity and tradition. Oakeshott (see p. 177) argued that traditional values and established customs should be upheld and respected on account of their familiarity, which engenders a sense of reassurance, stability and security. This suggests that there is a general human disposition to favour tradition over innovation, the established over the new. To be a conservative, Oakeshott suggested, is 'to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the

Michael Oakeshott (1901–90)

UK political philosopher. Oakeshott was a professor of political science at the London School of Economics from 1951 until his retirement in 1968. His collection of essays *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962) and his more systematic work of political philosophy *On Human Conduct* (1975) are often seen as major contributions to conservative traditionalism. By highlighting the importance of civil association and insisting on the limited province of politics, he also developed themes closely associated with liberal thought. Though often seen as an advocate of a non-ideological style of politics, in line with the ideas of Edmund Burke (see p. 36), Oakeshott influenced many of the thinkers of the New Right.

CONCEPT

Postmaterialism

Postmaterialism is a theory that explains the nature of political concerns and values in terms of levels of economic development. It is loosely based on Abraham Maslow's (1908–70) 'hierarchy of needs', which places esteem and self-actualization above material or economic needs. Postmaterialism assumes that conditions of material scarcity breed egoistical and acquisitive values, meaning that politics is dominated by economic issues. However, in conditions of widespread prosperity, individuals express more interest in 'postmaterial' or 'quality of life' issues, typically concerned with morality, political justice and personal fulfilment.

limited to the unbound, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the super abundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss' (Oakeshott, 1962).

The defence of traditional values and established beliefs has been one of the central themes of neoconservatism, advanced in the USA by social theorists such as Daniel Bell (1976) and Irving Kristol (1983), who have warned against the destruction of spiritual values brought about both by market pressures and by the spread of permissiveness. The problem with this position, however, is that it assumes there is an authoritative moral system upon which order and stability can be based. The simple fact is that, in modern multicultural and multireligious societies, it is doubtful whether any set of values can be regarded as authoritative. To define certain values as 'traditional', 'established' or 'majority' values may simply be an attempt to impose a particular moral system on the rest of society. Indeed, empirical evidence appears to support the view that political culture is becoming increasingly fragmented, and that modern societies are characterized by growing moral and cultural diversity.

An alternative view of the social capital debate suggests not that there has been a decline of civic engagement or social connectedness, but that the forms these have taken have changed. According to Inglehart (1977, 1990), such shifts are linked to the spread of affluence and to the growth, particularly amongst young people, of 'postmaterial' values. As new generations have grown up since the 1960s accustomed, in advanced industrial countries at least, to economic security and material well-being, 'traditional' ideas about subjects such as sex, marriage and personal conduct have been displaced by more 'liberal' or 'permissive' attitudes. At the same time, traditional political attitudes and allegiances have been weakened and sometimes replaced by growing interest in issues such as feminism, nuclear disarmament, animal rights and environmental protection. Thus party membership and electoral turnout may have declined but there has been a growth of interest in single-issue protest politics and campaigning groups. Post-Fordist (see p. 154) theorists argue that such cultural changes are irresistible, because they are linked to a wholesale shift in economic and political organization that is bringing about a decline in deference and a rise of individualism (see p. 158).

CONCEPT

Political socialization

Political socialization is the process through which individuals acquire political beliefs and values, and by which these are transmitted from one generation to the next. Families and schools are usually viewed as 'primary' agents of political socialization, while the workplace, peer groups and the media are viewed as 'secondary' agents of political socialization. Interest in political socialization peaked during the so-called 'behavioural revolution', as external stimuli were seen to explain (and possibly determine) political attutudes or behaviour.

THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Any examination of the factors that influence people's psychological orientation to politics, whether their long-term beliefs and values (political culture) or their short-term reaction to particular policies or problems (public opinion), must, in modern circumstances, take account of the crucial role played by the media. The mass media have been recognized as politically significant since the advent of mass literacy and the popular press in the late nineteenth century. However, it is widely accepted that, through a combination of social and technological changes, the media have become increasingly powerful political actors and, in some respects, more deeply enmeshed in the political process. Three developments are particularly noteworthy. First, the impact of the so-called 'primary' agents of political socialization, such as the family and social class, has declined. Whereas once people acquired, in late childhood and adolescence in particular, a framework of political sympathies and leanings that adult experience tended to modify or deepen, but seldom radically transformed, this has been weakened in modern society by greater social and geographical mobility, and by the spread of individualist and consumerist values. This, in turn, widens the scope for the media's political influence, as they are the principal mechanism through which information about issues and policies, and therefore political choices, is presented to the public.

Second, the development of a mass television audience from the 1950s onwards, and more recently the proliferation of channels and media output associated with the **'new' media**, has massively increased the media's penetration of people's everyday lives. This means that the public now relies on the media more heavily than ever before. For instance, television is a much more important source of news and current-affairs information than political meetings; many more people watch televised sport than participate in it; and even shopping is increasingly being carried out through shopping channels and the internet. Particular interest has focused on the burgeoning political significance of the internet, with, by 2011, two billion people worldwide having access to it. Although the highest internet penetration is in North America (78 per cent), Oceania/Australia (60 per cent) and Europe (58 per cent), the highest usage growth is in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

Third, the media have become more powerful economic actors. Not only are major media corporations major global players, but also a series of mergers has tended to incorporate the formerly discrete domains of publishing, television, film, music, computers and telecommunications into a single massive 'infotainment' industry (Scammel, 2000). Media businesses such as Microsoft, Time Warner Inc, Disney and News Corporation have accumulated so much economic and market power that no government can afford to ignore them.

● **'New' media**: A generic term for the many different forms of electronic communication made possible through digital or computer technology.

Theories of the mass media

Few commentators doubt the media's ability to shape political attitudes and values or, at least, to structure political and electoral choice by influencing public perceptions about the nature and importance of issues and problems, thereby.

CONCEPT

Mass media

The media comprise those societal institutions that are concerned with the production and distribution of all forms of knowledge, information and entertainment. The 'mass' media channel communication towards a large and undifferentiated audience using relatively advanced technology. The clearest examples are the 'broadcast' media (television and radio) and the 'print' media (newspapers and magazines). The 'new' media (cable and satellite telecommunications, the Internet and so on) has, subverted the notion of mass media by dramatically increasing audience fragmentation.

However, there is considerable debate about the political significance of this influence. A series of rival theories offer contrasting views of the media's political impact. The most important of these are the following:

- the pluralist model
- the dominant-ideology model
- the elite-values model
- the market model.

Pluralist model

Pluralism (see p. 100) highlights diversity and multiplicity generally. The pluralist model of the mass media portrays the media as an ideological marketplace in which a wide range of political views are debated and discussed. While not rejecting the idea that the media can affect political views and sympathies, this nevertheless suggests that their impact is essentially neutral, in that they tend to reflect the balance of forces within society at large.

The pluralist view, nevertheless, portrays the media in strongly positive terms. In ensuring an 'informed citizenry', the mass media both enhance the quality of democracy and guarantee that government power is checked. This 'watchdog' role was classically demonstrated in the 1974 *Washington Post* investigation into the Watergate scandal, which led to the resignation of Richard Nixon as US president. Some, moreover, argue that the advent of the new media, and particularly the internet, has strengthened pluralism and political competition by giving protest groups, including 'anti-capitalist' activists, a relatively cheap and highly effective means of disseminating information and organizing campaigns, as discussed later in the chapter. However, the pluralist model suffers from significant deficiencies. For example, weak and unorganized groups are excluded from access to mainstream publishing and broadcasting, meaning that the media's ideological marketplace tends to be relatively narrow and generally pro-establishment in character. In addition, private ownership and formal independence from government may not be sufficient to guarantee the media's oppositional character in the light of the increasingly symbiotic relationship between government and journalists and broadcasters.

Dominant-ideology model

The dominant-ideology model portrays the mass media as a politically conservative force that is aligned to the interests of economic and social elites, and serves to promote compliance or political passivity amongst the masses. In its Marxist version, rooted in the larger Marxist critique of political culture (discussed earlier in the chapter) and particularly the ideas of Gramsci, it suggests that the media propagate bourgeois ideas and maintain capitalist hegemony, acting in the interests of major corporations and media moguls. Ownership, in other words, ultimately determines the political and other views that the mass media disseminate, and ownership is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of global media conglomerates. The six largest are Time Warner Inc, News Corporation, Viacom, Disney, CBS and Bertelsmann.

From this perspective, the media play an important role in promoting globalization (see p. 142), in that their tendency to spread ideas, images and values that are compatible with western consumerism (see p. 159) helps to open up new markets and extend business penetration worldwide.

One of the most influential and sophisticated versions of the dominant-ideology model was developed by Noam Chomsky (see p. 181) and Ed Herman in *Manufacturing Consent* (2006), in the form of the 'propaganda model'. They identified five 'filters' through which news and political coverage are distorted by the structures of the media itself. These filters are as follows:

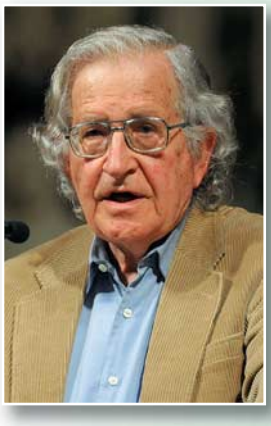
- the business interests of owner companies
- a sensitivity to the views and concerns of advertisers and sponsors
- the sourcing of news and information from 'agents of power', such as governments and business-backed think-tanks
- 'flak' or pressure applied to journalists, including threats of legal action
- an unquestioning belief in the benefits of market competition and consumer capitalism.

Chomsky's analysis emphasizes the degree to which the mass media can subvert democracy, helping, for example, to mobilize popular support in the USA for imperialist foreign policy goals. The dominant-ideology model is, nevertheless, also subject to criticism. Objections to it include that it underestimates the extent to which the press and broadcasters, particularly public service broadcasters, pay attention to progressive social, racial and development issues. Moreover, the assumption that media output shapes political attitudes is determinist and neglects the role played by people's own values in filtering, and possibly resisting, media messages.

Elite-values model

The elite-values model shifts attention away from the ownership of media corporations to the mechanism through which media output is controlled. This view suggests that editors, journalists and broadcasters enjoy significant professional independence, and that even the most interventionist of media moguls are able only to set a broad political agenda, but not to control day-to-day editorial decision-making. The media's political bias (see p. 183) therefore reflects the values of groups that are disproportionally represented amongst its senior professionals. However, there are a number of versions of this model, depending on the characteristics that are considered to be politically significant.

One version of the elite-valuies model holds that the anti-socialist and politically conservative views of most mainstream newspapers, magazines and television stations derive from the fact that their senior professionals are well-paid and generally from middle-class backgrounds. A quite different version is sometimes advanced by conservatives, who believe that the media reflect the views of university-educated, liberal intellectuals, whose values and concerns are quite different from those of the mass of the population. In its feminist version, this model highlights the predominance of males amongst senior journalists and broadcasters, implying that this both explains the inadequate attention given to



Noam Chomsky (born 1928)

US linguistic theorist and radical intellectual. Chomsky first achieved distinction as a scholar in the field of linguistic studies. His *Syntactic Structures* (1957) revolutionized the discipline with the theory of 'transformational grammar', which proposed that humans have an innate capacity to acquire language. Radicalized during the Vietnam War, Chomsky subsequently became the leading radical critic of US foreign policy, developing his views in an extensive range of works including *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1969), *New Military Humanism* (1999) and *Hegemony and Survival* (2004). In works such as (with Edward Herman) *Manufacturing Consent* ([1988] 2006), he developed a radical critique of the mass media and examined how popular support for imperialist aggression is mobilized.

women's views and issues by the mass media, and accounts for the confrontational style of interviewing and political discussion sometimes adopted by broadcasters and journalists. Although the elite-values model helps to explain why the range of political views expressed by the mass media is often more restricted than pluralists suggest, it also has its limitations. Chief amongst these is that it fails to take full enough account of the pressures that bear upon senior media professionals; these, for example, include the views and interests of owners and commercial considerations; notably, 'ratings' figures.

Market model

The market model of the mass media differs from the other models, in that it dispenses with the idea of media bias: it holds that newspapers and television *reflect*, rather than shape, the views of the general public. This occurs because, regardless of the personal views of media owners and senior professionals, private media outlets are, first and foremost, businesses concerned with profit maximization and thus with extending market share. The media therefore give people 'what they want', and cannot afford to alienate existing or potential viewers or readers by presenting political viewpoints with which they may disagree. Such considerations may be less pressing in relation to public service broadcasters, such as the BBC, which are more insulated from commercial and advertiser pressures but, even here, the tyranny of 'ratings' is increasingly evident.

Nevertheless, although this model dispenses with the idea that at least the privately-owned mass media should be seen as part of the political process, it helps to explain some significant trends in political life. One of these may be growing popular disenchantment with politics resulting from the trivialization of political coverage. Fearful of losing 'market share', television companies in particular have reduced their coverage of serious political debate, and thus abandoned their responsibility for educating and informing citizens, in favour of 'infotainment'.

Media, democracy and governance

Custodians of democracy?

The impact that the media have on democracy is one of the most widely-debated aspects of the relationship between the media and politics. For many, the existence of a **free press** is one of the key features of democratic governance. However, how do the media act as custodians of democracy? And why have some questioned the media's democratic credentials, even arguing that they may undermine it? The media has traditionally been said to promote democracy in two key ways: by fostering public debate and political engagement, and by acting as a 'public watchdog' to check abuses of power. (The specific impact of the new media on democracy and politics more generally is considered later in the chapter.)

The capacity to provide a civic forum in which meaningful and serious political debate can take place is often viewed as the key democratic role of the media. The virtue of this is that better-informed citizens with more independent and considered views will be more politically engaged. The media are therefore agents of political education. Indeed, the media may have largely replaced formal representative institutions, such as assemblies, parliaments and local councils, as arenas for the dialogue, debate and deliberation that are the very stuff of democratic politics. This has happened because the media are, arguably, better-suited to this role than are traditional representative bodies. In addition to offering the public perhaps its only meaningful opportunity to watch politicians in action (through, for example, interviews with politicians and televised assembly debates), the media provide a forum for the expression of a much wider range of viewpoints and opinions than is possible within representative institutions composed only of elected politicians. Thus, academics and scientists, business leaders and trade union bosses, and representatives of interest groups and lobbyists of all kinds are able to express views and engage in public debate through the mechanism of media. Not only do the media substantially widen the range of views and opinions expressed in political debate, but they also present debate and discussion in a way that is lively and engaging for the general public, devoid of the formality, even stuffiness, that characterizes the exchanges that take place in assemblies and council chambers around the world.

The 'watchdog' role of the media is, in a sense, a subset of the political debate argument. The role of the media, from this perspective, is to ensure that public accountability takes place, by scrutinizing the activities of government and exposing abuses of power. Once again, in carrying out this role the media is supplementing and, to some extent, replacing the work of formal representative institutions. Media professionals such as researchers, journalists and television presenters are particularly suited to this role because they are 'outside' politics and have no interest other than to expose incompetence, corruption or simply muddled thinking whenever and wherever it can be found. By contrast, if public accountability is left solely in the hands of professional politicians, it may be constrained by the fact that those who attempt to expose ineptitude or wrongdoing wish themselves, at some stage, to hold government power. This may not only taint their motives, but it may also discourage them from criticizing processes and practices that they may wish to take advantage of in the future.

● **Free press**: Newspapers (and, by extension, other media outlets) that are free from censorship and political interference by government and, usually, are privately owned.

CONCEPT

Political bias

Political bias refers to political views that systematically favour the values or interests of one group over another as opposed to 'balanced' or 'objective' beliefs. Bias, however, may take various forms (McQuail, 1992). *Partisan* bias is explicit and deliberately promoted (newspaper editorials). *Propaganda* bias is deliberate but unacknowledged ('lazy' students or 'militant' Muslims). *Unwitting* bias occurs through the use of seemingly professional considerations (the 'newsworthiness' of a story). *Ideological* bias operates on the basis of assumptions and value judgements that are embedded in a particular belief system (wealth is gained through talent and hard work).

However, the media can only perform this role effectively if they are properly independent, and not dominated by government. Democratic governance therefore requires either that the publicly financed media are accountable to an independent commission, or that there is an appropriate level of competition from 'free' or privately financed media. The example of WikiLeaks nevertheless highlight how controversial the media's 'watchdog' role can be in practice (see p. 184).

However, reservations have also been expressed about the capacity of the media to promote effective democratic governance. The first of these, as advanced by dominant-ideology and elite-values theorists, is that, far from providing citizens with a wide and balanced range of political views, the content of the media is tainted by clear political biases. Whether political bias stems from the opinions and values of editors, journalists and broadcasters, or from a more general alignment between the interests of the media and those of economic and social elites, it is difficult to see how the media's duty to provide objective information and remain faithful to public-service principles can be discharged reliably and consistently in practice. Particular emphasis has, in this respect, been placed on the implications of media ownership, and the fact that the views and interests of major corporations or powerful media moguls cannot but, at some level, influence media output. Insofar as the mass media affects the political agenda, this agenda is likely to be politically conservative and, at least, compatible with the interests of dominant groups in society.

Second, as the mass media is not subject to public accountability, it is the classic example of 'power without responsibility' (Curran and Seaton, 2009). However well-informed, knowledgeable and stimulating the views of journalists and broadcasters may be, and however eager they may be to portray themselves as the 'voice of the people', media professionals – unlike elected politicians – 'represent' no one other than themselves, and have no meaningful basis for claiming to articulate public opinion. Third, there are reasons for doubting the independence of the media from government. As discussed in the final section of this chapter, all too often a symbiotic relationship develops between media professionals and the political elite which constrains both the mass media's political views and its capacity to act as an effective 'watchdog'.

The media and governance

Apart from its impact (for good or ill) on democracy, the prominence of the mass media in an 'information age' has affected the processes of governance (see p. 74) in a variety of ways. The most significant of these include the transformation of political leadership and, with it, a reapportionment of government power; changes to the political culture that, some have warned, are leading to a growing disenchantment with politics and making societies more difficult to govern; and alterations to the behaviour of governments and the nature of policy-making.

The chief way in which the media has transformed political leadership is through growing interest in the personal lives and private conduct of senior political figures, at the expense of serious and 'sober' policy and ideological debate. This, in part, stems from the media's, and particularly television's, obsession with image rather than issues, and with personality rather than policies. In the UK and other parliamentary systems, it is evident in a tendency towards the

POLITICS IN ACTION . . .

WikiLeaks: speaking truth to power?

Events: WikiLeaks was launched in 2006 as a project of the Sunshine Press. Since January 2007, its key spokesperson has been Julian Assange, an Australian internet activist, often described as the 'founder of WikiLeaks'. The main purpose of Wikileaks is to publish and comment on leaked documents alleging government and corporate misconduct, with documents and other materials being submitted anonymously through an electronic 'drop box'. Either directly, or through collaboration with other media (including, at times, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*), WikiLeaks has published a massive quantity of documents on issues ranging from war, killing, torture and detention to the suppression of free speech and free press, and ecology and climate change. Many of the most high profile leaks have shed light on US military, security and intelligence activities. These have included almost 400,00 previously secret US military field reports about the Iraq War; secret US files on the war in Afghanistan which reveal civilian killings, 'friendly fire' deaths and the activities of special forces; more than 250,000 US state department cables, sent from, or to, US embassies around the world (so-called 'CableGate'); and US military files containing secret assessments of the 779 detainees held at the Guantánamo Bay detention centre.

Significance: Making use of the new internet culture and modern technology, WikiLeaks has been responsible for the biggest leak of secret information in history. However, assessments of the implications and value of its work have varied starkly. Supporters have used two key arguments to uphold media freedom. The first is that transparency is the only effective means of preventing, or at least reducing, conspiracy, corruption, exploitation and oppression. Quite simply, those in power, whether in government, the military, the security forces or in the world of business and finance will be less likely to abuse their positions and engage in unethical activities if they know that their actions are likely to be publicly exposed. Open governance thus promotes good governance. Second, media freedom underpins democracy, in that it allows citizens to make up their own minds, having access to information from all sources and not merely 'official' sources. There is therefore a clear public interest defence for 'whistleblowing', or 'principled leaking'. This was accepted by the 1971 'Pentagon Papers' case, in which the US Supreme Court upheld the right of the *New York Times* to publish classified documents about the conduct of the Vietnam War, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, on the grounds that 'only a free and unconstrained press can effectively expose deception in government'.

WikiLeak's activities have also attracted criticism, however. These have included that WikiLeaks has been over-concerned with generating publicity for itself and with promoting funding (especially in the light of restrictions imposed by the financial industry on online payments to WikiLeaks). However, the most serious criticisms have alleged that WikiLeaks has allowed information to get into the public domain that could both threaten national security and leave intelligence operatives working in foreign countries, together with those who assist them, vulnerable to identification and reprisals. This has been claimed, in particular, in relation to CableGate, where the alleged source of the leaked embassy cables, Private Bradley Manning, a US army intelligence analyst, was accused in a pre-trial military court hearing in December 2011 of 'aiding the enemy'. The release of the CableGate documents stimulated a wave of criticism not only from governments around the world, but also from human rights groups and former sympathizers and partners, including *The Guardian*. Some have accused Wikileaks of going beyond a traditional liberal defence of openness and transparent government in supporting 'free information fundamentalism', a stance that has deeply libertarian, if not anarchist, implications. For example, the private rituals of the Masons, Mormons and other groups were published even though this did not serve a clear political purpose.

'**presidentialization**', or 'Americanization', of politics (as discussed in Chapter 13). Such trends reflect not so much conscious bias on the part of the media, as an attempt to 'sell' politics to a mass audience that is deemed to be little interested in issues and policies. This also accounts for the tendency to treat elections as 'horse races', the public's attention being focused less on policy significance of the outcome and more on who is going to win. These two tendencies invariably coincide, turning elections into 'beauty contests' between leading politicians, each of whom serves as the 'brand image' of their party. Leaders are therefore judged largely on the basis of their 'televisual' skills (relaxed manner, sense of humour, ability to demonstrate the 'popular touch' and so on), rather than their mastery of political issues and capacity for serious political debate. However, has exposing leading politicians to the unrelenting glare of media attention merely given them celebrity status, or has media attention affected the location of power within the governmental system?

There can be little doubt that the advent of the 'media age' has changed the behaviour of political leaders, as well as affected the career prospects of individual politicians. For example, presentational factors, such as personal appearance, hairstyle, dress sense and so on, have become more important in determining political preferment or advancement. However, such developments have not merely changed the 'face' of modern politics; they have reordered power relationships both within the political executive and between the executive and the assembly. The growth of '**celebrity politics**' gives presidents, prime ministers and other party leaders the ability to make personalized appeals to the voters, creating the phenomenon of **spatial leadership**. This allows leaders to appeal 'over the heads' of their senior colleagues, parties and government institutions, directly to the public. Furthermore, the messages they give, and the policy and ideological stances they adopt, are increasingly determined by leading politicians personally, supported, it appears, by an ever-expanding band of public relations consultants, 'spin doctors', media managers, pollsters and publicity directors. One of the consequences of this is that junior politicians may have an additional reason for deferring to their leaders: their fear of damaging their leader's image and reputation. If the leader is damaged, especially by splits and internal criticism, all members of his or her party or government suffer. Political power thus comes to be structured on the basis of the publicity and media attention received by individual politicians. The greater the media attention, the greater the political leverage. However, media attention is far from an unqualified benefit for political leaders. Although their triumphs and successes can be publicly trumpeted, their flaws, failings and transgressions can also be ruthlessly exposed. Indeed, the ultimate vulnerability of contemporary political leaders may well be that negative media coverage may turn them into 'electoral liabilities', encouraging their parties and colleagues to remove them in order to 'save the party', or their own political careers.

The second way in which the media has affected governance is through its impact on the political culture. The media is sometimes charged with having created a climate of corrosive cynicism amongst the public, leading to growing popular disenchantment with politics generally, and a lack of trust in governments and politicians of all complexions (Lloyd, 2004). This may, in turn, be linked to trends that have afflicted mature democracies in particular, such as declining voter turnout and falling party membership. The UK is often seen as

● **Presidentialization**: A growing emphasis on personal leadership, in line with the role and powers of an executive president.

● **Celebrity politics**: Either or both the cultivation of 'celebrityhood' by elected politicians, or interventions by stars of popular culture into the political domain.

● **Spatial leadership**: The tendency of political leaders to distance themselves from their parties and governments by presenting themselves as 'outsiders', or developing their own political stance or ideological position.

CONCEPT

E-democracy

E-democracy (sometimes called 'digital democracy' or 'cyberdemocracy') refers to the use of computer-based technologies to enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes. This nevertheless, may happen in different ways. (1) In the *representative* model, e-democracy seeks to strengthen the operation of established democratic mechanisms (e-voting and e-petitions,). (2) In the *deliberative* model, e-democracy aims to open up new opportunities for direct popular participation (electronic direct democracy). (3) In the *activist* model, e-democracy attempts to strengthen political and social movements and bolster citizen power generally ('virtual' communities and ICT-based protests).

the most advanced example of such a media-driven 'culture of contempt', but similar tendencies are evident elsewhere; notably, in the USA, Australia and Canada. Why has this happened? A critical stance towards politicians in general and governments in particular is, of course, vital to the maintenance of democratic governance. However, the distinction between legitimate criticism and systematic and relentless negativity may, in practice, be difficult to uphold. This occurs, in part, because increasingly intense commercial pressures have forced the media to make their coverage of politics 'sexy' and attention-grabbing. The media, after all, is a business, and this places inevitable pressure on the coverage of news and current affairs. Facts are absorbed progressively more quickly into a swirl of comment and interpretation, blurring, seemingly altogether, the distinction between what happens and what it means. Similarly, routine political debate and policy analysis receive less and less attention, as the media focus instead on – or 'hype' – scandals of various kinds and allegations of incompetence, policy failure or simple inertia. Leading politicians have, as a result, come to live in a kind of ongoing reality-television programme, the sole purpose of which appears to be to embarrass and denigrate them at every possible turn. The public, for their part, tend to view politicians as untrustworthy and deceitful, according them the same level of respect they would accord any other reality-television programme participant (The implications of such developments are examined further in Chapter 20.)

The final way in which the media has influenced governance is through its impact on the policy-making process. This has happened in at least two ways. The first is that, just like everyone else in society, government is bombarded by a much greater quantity of information arriving almost immediately. Knowing too much can sometimes be as dangerous as knowing too little. An example of this can be found in the USA's inability to predict and prevent the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. The problem the USA faced was not that it lacked information about al-Qaeda, its plans and movements, but that the sheer quantity of national-security intelligence available made effective analysis almost impossible. Moreover, as news and information spreads around the globe at a faster pace, governments are forced to react to events more quickly, and often before they have been fully discussed and digested. An age of '24/7 news' inevitably becomes one of '24/7 government'. Politicians are encouraged, even forced, to take a stance on issues simply to avoid being criticized for inertia or inactivity, leaving little time for the analysis of policy options and their implications. Second, greater reliance on the media means that it is often the media, and not government, that sets the political agenda and dictates the direction of policy-making. For example, the fact that television pictures of the Asian tsunami in December 2004 were broadcast almost immediately across the globe, creating an outpouring of public sympathy for its victims and leading to unprecedented levels of private charitable donations, forced governments around the world, within days, to make substantial increases in the scale of their of aid and support.

New media and the rise of e-politics

The revolution in communication technologies, brought about since the 1990s especially by the spread of satellite and cable television, mobile phones, the internet and digital technology generally, has transformed the media and society,

helping to create what has been called an 'information society' or a 'network society' (as discussed in Chapter 7). This is also a process that has occurred with remarkably rapidity. For instance, internet penetration worldwide went from about 1 in 17 of the world's population in 2000, to almost 1 in 3 by 2012, and Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia and Google, unknown only a few years ago, have become part of many people's everyday lives. But how, and to what extent, has new media affected politics? The most common claim is that new media are a progressive force, helping to improve the quality of political life, in particular by contributing to a general transfer power from governments and political elites to the public at large. This is often summed up in the idea of 'e-democracy'. However, e-democracy is a vague and contested term which covers a diverse range of activities, some of which may be 'top-down' (initiated by government or other public bodies) while others are 'bottom-up' (initiated by citizens and activists), with a further distinction being made between those that involve a one-way flow of information from government to citizens and those involving a two-way process of interaction. Examples of e-democracy include the following:

- online voting (e-voting) in elections or referendums
- online petitions (e-petitions) organized by governments or other bodies
- the use of ICT to publicize, organize, lobby or fundraise (e-campaigning)
- accessing political information, news and comments via websites, blogs (web-logs) and so on
- the use of interactive television or social networking sites, or **social media**, to allow citizens to engage in political debate and, possibly, policy-making
- the use of mobile phones and social media to organize popular protests and demonstrations.

New media can be seen to have changed, or be changing, politics in at least three key ways. In the first place, electronic mechanisms have altered the conduct of elections. This is particularly apparent in the case of election campaigns, which increasingly revolve around internet-based activities. Websites, emails and podcasts provide political candidates and parties with a fast and cheap means of getting their message across to a (potentially) large audience, in the process allowing them also to recruit campaign volunteers and raise campaign funds. E-campaigning has the advantage that it is particularly effective in reaching younger people, who are often the most difficult section of the population to engage through conventional strategies. Although the internet has been used in campaigning since the mid-1990s, particularly in the USA, it became particularly prominent during Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Obama's team used forums and social media such as Facebook and MySpace to build relationships particularly with supporters and would-be supporters aged 18–29, also encouraging the spread of wider networks of support via the website MyBarackObama.com. Sympathizers were also sent regular updates on events and policy positions via emails and text messages. Nevertheless, new technologies were certainly not the be-all and end-all of the Obama campaign, which also relied heavily, and spent most of its money, on more traditional strategies such as television advertising and poster campaigns.

A further way in which digital innovations have affected elections is through growing experiments in electronic voting, sometimes portrayed as 'push-button

● **Social media**: Forms of elecronic communication that facilitate social interaction and the formation of online communities through the exchange of user-generated content.

democracy'. E-voting has been particularly important in countries such as India, where it has proved to be the only practicable solution to the problem of tallying some 400 million votes without substantial delays occurring in announcing election results. The first experiments in India in the use of electronic voting machines located at polling stations started in 1982, with e-voting subsequently being adopted, first, for state elections and, later, for national elections. Similar electronic mechanisms have been used in countries ranging from France, Germany and Finland to Romania and the Philippines. However, although trials have taken place in the use of 'remote' e-voting, through use of the internet (sometimes called 'i-voting'), its wider adoption has been hampered because fears about the greater likelihood of electoral fraud have yet to be allayed.

Second, new media offer citizens wider and easier access to political information and political comment. This has occurred in a number of ways. For example, governments in all parts of the world have, albeit at different speeds, recognized the advantage of making government information available online, and, in a growing number of cases, of allowing citizens to access government services through websites, so-called 'e-government'. The most significant new sources of information are, nevertheless, non-governmental in character. The proliferation of websites developed, variously, by professional groups, businesses, lobbying bodies and think-tanks means that, for the first time, citizens and citizen groups are privy to a quantity and quality of information that may rival that of government. This has generally empowered non-state actors at the expense of national governments and traditional political elites. Non-governmental organizations (see p. 248) and interest groups (see p. 247) have thus become more effective in challenging the positions and actions of government and, sometimes, even displaced government as an authoritative source of views and information about specialist subjects ranging from the environment and global poverty to public health and civil liberties. A further development has been the impact of new media on journalism. This has occurred in two ways. In the first, the rise of the blog has greatly expanded the contours of political commentary, as the growing 'blogosphere' allows writers, academics, politicians and others to share their observations and opinions about political matter with whoever may be interested in accessing them. In the second, there has been a growth of 'user-generated content', stemming from the increased willingness of private citizens, often in newsworthy or politically-charged situations, to share their thoughts, experiences and, frequently, pictures with other via social media.

Third, new media have supported the development of political and social movements, and increased their effectiveness, thus giving rise to a new style of activist politics, sometimes called the 'new politics', and contributing, some argue, to a general shift of power from governments to citizens. The key advantage of new media, from this perspective, is not just that they open up new opportunities for political participation, but also that these forms of participation are, by their nature, decentralized and non-hierarchic. Armed with mobile phones and through the use of the internet, anti-globalization or 'anti-capitalist' protesters have been able to mount demonstrations, and engage in agitation and direct action, a trend that first became apparent during the so-called 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999, when some 50,000 activists forced the cancellation of the opening ceremony of a World Trade Organization meeting. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook were, similarly, instrumental in facilitating the spread of

pro-democracy protests during the 2011 Tunisian revolution, at the beginning of the Arab Spring (see p. 88). Their capacity to promote self-management and grass-roots organization has made new media particularly attractive for modern anarchist and libertarian groups, sometimes dubbed 'new' anarchists. Old-style anarchist collectives have therefore given way to online anarchist (or anarchist-style) networks such as Anonymous, which, since 2008, has engaged in campaigns and protests, usually associated with internet freedom or exposing corporate malpractice, and sometimes associated with what has been called '**hacktivism**'.

New media have, nevertheless, also attracted criticism. These have, for instance, linked the trend towards e-democracy with the growth of a privatized and consumerist form of citizenship. How meaningful is democratic participation if it lacks a genuinely public dimension and fails to engender meaningful debate and discussion. Perhaps an underlying problem with the debate over the impact of new media is the tendency to believe that political problems (such as low voter turnout rates or declining party membership), can be solved by 'technical fixes'. Similarly, it is perhaps a mistake to suggest that technology, in itself, has a particular political character, whether positive or negative; rather, technology may be either liberating or oppressive, depending on who is using it and the uses to which it is put. It is worth remembering, for instance, that the same technologies that helped in the spread and coordination of pro-democracy demonstrations during the Tunisian revolution were the same technologies that, only six months later, were also used to organize looting during riots in London and other English cities.

Media globalization

An aspect of the media's influence that has attracted growing political attention is its role in strengthening globalization. Radio and television started this process, as it became increasingly difficult to insulate the populations of one country from news, information and images broadcast from other countries. An example of this was the extent to which the communist regimes of Eastern Europe were destabilized by the growing penetration of pro-western, and therefore pro-capitalist, radio and television broadcasts from Western Europe and the USA, contributing to the revolutions of 1989–91. New media, and especially satellite television, mobile phones and the internet, have dramatically intensified this process, both because of their dramatic spread and because of their inherently transnational characters. China and Singapore are amongst the few countries still trying to censor the internet, with such attempts likely to become less and less successful over time. Insofar as the media facilitates, or even fuels, globalization, it has contributed to a far-reaching range of political developments, including the growth of a globalized capitalist economy, the declining (or, at least, changing) role of the state, and the emergence of what some see as a homogenized global culture.

The role of the media in promoting **cultural globalization** has been an area of particular controversy. The power of the media, allied to the growth of transnational corporations (see p. 149) and trends such as mass tourism, is often held to be responsible for the development of a single global system that imprints itself on all parts of the world; this results, in effect, in a global mono-

● **Hacktivism**: The use of computers and computer networks to achieve political ends by methods including 'denial-of-service' attacks on targeted websites.

● **Cultural globalization**: The process whereby information, commodities and images produced in one part of the world enter into a global flow that tends to 'flatten out' cultural differences between nations and regions.

Debating . . .

Does the wider use of new media enrich politics?

It is generally accepted that new digital or computer technologies are having a profound impact on society and politics, but it is less clear what that impact is. Is ICT a motor for decentralization and democracy, or may new technologies debase politics and threaten freedom?

YES

Modernizing politics. Technological development reflects an ongoing desire to use science and innovation to make human existence more convenient and comfortable, and this applies in politics as well as other spheres of life. E-voting and 'virtual' referendums thus enable citizens to express their views easily and conveniently, possibly without having to leave home. Falling electoral turnouts may therefore simply be a consequence of the failure of the democratic process to keep up-to-date with how citizens in an 'information society' wish to participate in politics.

Knowledge is power. New technologies massively enlarge citizens' access to information, making possible, for the first time, a truly free exchange of ideas and views. The internet already makes available to private citizens specialist information that was once only available to governments. Accessing information through Wikipedia and the myriad other online sources is not only almost instantaneous, but it also exposes the public to a rich diversity of views, including radical and dissident ones.

Citizen empowerment. The great advantage of new technologies is that they make possible a two-way transmission of views, thereby promoting active and engaged citizenship. Instead of participating in politics simply through the act of voting every few years, citizens can express views and opinions on an almost continuous basis, through, for instance, online consultations on draft legislation and online petitions. More radically, new media may foster direct popular participation, making a reality of Athenian-style democracy, for so long dismissed as impracticable, or relevant only to township meetings.

Decentralized activism. The broadest claim made for new media is that, in contributing to a wholesale shift in power from political elites to the public at large, it is bringing about a process of radical democratization. This occurs because new technologies are implicitly egalitarian (being relatively cheap, easily accessible and simple to use), and also facilitate decentralized and spontaneous social action. As modern protest movements clearly demonstrate, the use of mobile phones and social media in particular helps to make leadership and formal organization unnecessary, even irrelevant.

NO

Technological 'Big Brother'. Technology has always been developed to serve the interests of elite or powerful groups, and ICT is no exception. Contrary to the popular image that they are tools of liberation, mobile phones and the internet actually provide the police, security forces, tax officials and so on with access to a massive amount of information about the movements, views and activities of private citizens. As such, new media provide a highly effective means of controlling dissident behaviour and containing political opposition.

Dangers of information anarchy. Many of the new political spaces opened up by new media have been polluted by both the nature of the views they feature and the style of expression they tend to encourage. The internet provides a platform for religious fundamentalists, racists, ethnic nationalists and other extremists, who would otherwise struggle to attract public attention. Similarly, the blogosphere tends to be dominated by shrill, uncivil and opinionated views, fashioned, seemingly, by the desire to create notoriety.

New inequalities. The claim that new technologies are implicitly egalitarian is bogus. Most obviously, a 'digital divide' has opened up based on the fact that access to new communication technologies is not universal. The 'information rich' have come to dominate the 'information poor'. In the feminist version of this argument, computers and technology generally have been seen to benefit men, since they reflect essentially male interests and patterns of thought. New media also provide private business with new opportunities to advertise, generate profits and improve their public image.

Impoverished, debased democracy. E-democracy, or 'virtual' democracy, threatens to turn the democratic process into a series of push-button referendums while citizens sit alone in their own living rooms. This further erodes the 'public' dimension of political participation, reducing democratic citizenship to a set of consumer choices, somewhat akin to voting in the television show *Big Brother*. By weakening face-to-face human interaction, the danger is that people will be consumed by their own opinions, and become indifferent to those of others.

CONCEPT

Propaganda

Propaganda is information (or disinformation) disseminated in a deliberate attempt to shape opinions and, possibly, stimulate political action.
Propaganda is a pejorative term, implying both untruth or distortion, and a (usually crude) desire to manipulate and control public opinion.
Propaganda differs from political bias, in that it is systematic and deliberate, whereas the latter may be partial and unintentional.
A distinction is sometimes drawn between 'black' propaganda (blatant lies), 'grey' propaganda (distortions and half truths) and 'white' propaganda (the truth).

culture. The most prominent feature of this process has been the worldwide advance of consumerism and of the materialistic values and appetites that underpin burgeoning global capitalism. Benjamin Barber (1995) dubbed this emerging world 'McWorld', to capture the idea that mass communications and modern commerce, tied together by technology, has created a world in which people everywhere are mesmerized by 'fast music, fast computers, fast food – with MTV, McIntosh and McDonald's pressing nations into one commercially homogeneous theme park'. In this view of cultural globalization, the rich diversity of global cultures, religions, traditions and lifestyles is being subverted by a process of 'westernization' or 'Americanization', made possible by what has been called 'media imperialism'. The western – or, more specifically, American – character of cultural globalization stems not only from the fact that the West is the home of consumer capitalism, but also from the tendency of global media content to derive disproportionately from the West, and particularly from the USA. This is reflected in the rise of English as the global language, and in the global dominance of Hollywood films and US-produced television programmes.

However, this image of cultural homogenization fuelled by the global mass media fails to capture what is, in practice, a complex and often contradictory process. Alongside the media's tendency to 'flatten out' cultural differences, there are also strong tendencies towards diversity and pluralization. This has occurred in a number of ways and for a variety of reasons. In the first place, as Barber (1995) argued, the rise of McWorld has been symbiotically linked to the emergence of countervailing forces, the most notable of which is militant Islam, or what Barber called '*Jihad*'. The second development is that new media have substantially reduced the cost of mass communication, as well as widened access to it. An example of this is the success of the Qatar-based television station Al Jazeera, launched in 1996, in providing a forum for the expression of non-western views and opinions across the Arab world and beyond, offering a rival to, for instance, CNN, Voice of America and the BBC. Third, cultural exchange facilitated through the media is by no means a 'top-down' or one-way process; instead, all societies, including the economically and politically powerful, have become more varied and diverse as a result of the emergence of a globalized cultural marketplace. In return for Coca-Cola, McDonald's and MTV, developed states have increasingly been 'penetrated' by Bollywood films, Chinese martial arts epics, 'world music', and non-western religions and therapeutic practices.

Political communication

Propaganda machines

The notion that government and the media are always opposing forces, the latter exposing the failings and flaws of the former (either for the public's benefit or for commercial advantage), is highly misleading. Instead, the media have often been controlled, directly or indirectly, by government and used as a form of propaganda machine. The classic example of a propaganda machine was that constructed under Joseph Goebbels in Nazi Germany. The Nazis set out to 'coordinate' German society through an elaborate process of ideological indoctrination. For example, youth organizations were set up in the form of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Maidens; the school curriculum was entirely

revised and all teachers coerced to join the Nazi Teachers' League; and the German Labour Front replaced free trade unions, providing workers with recreational facilities through the 'Strength through Joy' organization. As chief propagandist of the Nazi Party, in 1933 Goebbels created a new department, the Reich Ministry of Information and Propaganda, which inundated Germany with an unending flood of propaganda. Little in the field of mass communication and entertainment escaped the **censorship** of Goebbels' ministry. It supervised all the writing, music, theatre, dance, painting, sculpture, film and radio. Goebbels placed particular stress on radio broadcasting and encouraged the manufacture of a cheap 'people's' radio set, which resulted in huge and ever-growing audiences for his propaganda through the radio. He began the world's first regular television service in 1935, which, although restricted to closed-circuit showing in Berlin, kept going until near the end of World War II.

Media propaganda was also a significant feature of communist regimes. The Soviet Union, for example, not only operated a system of strict censorship over the mass media, but also fostered a journalistic culture (the 'internal censor') that demanded total support of the ideology and policies of the Communist Party, or CPSU. Both the print and broadcast media were used as propaganda tools by the Soviet authorities, with media content unwaveringly mirroring the policies of the state at each stage in the history of the Soviet Union (Oates, 2005). However, the introduction of '***glasnost***' by Mikhail Gorbachev when he became CPSU General Secretary in 1985 initiated changes in the Soviet media that were to have far-reaching, and ultimately unstoppable, political implications. The high point of the media's influence came in August 1991, when journalists and broadcasters defied the *coup* that had toppled Gorbachev and was intended to reinstate authoritarian rule. In so doing, they contributed both to the collapse of the *coup* and, later in the year, to the downfall of the Soviet regime itself. Russia's record of media freedom in the postcommunist era has nevertheless been patchy. Despite the formal abolition of censorship in 1990 and the inclusion of freedom from censorship in the 1993 Russian Constitution (Article 29), the Russian media, and television in particular, continue to be dominated by state interests. Television channels such as Channel 1, NTV and RTR have been criticized during election campaigns of systematic bias towards Vladimir Putin and the government-backed United Russia party, and Russia remains one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist (Shiraev, 2010).

Criticisms of the use of the media as a propaganda machine are not restricted to totalitarian regimes and new democracies, however. For instance, controversy was sparked in Italy by Silvio Berlusconi's periods as prime minister in 1994–05, 2001–06 and 2008–11. Berlusconi, who is Italy's richest person, owns Mediaset, which controls three of Italy's six privately-owned television channels. In 1993 he founded the Forza Italia political movement, in part to further his own political ambitions. The success of Forza Italia was certainly linked to widespread disenchantment with Italy's sclerotic party system, but the movement undoubtedly also benefited from the consistently positive coverage it received in the Berlusconi-owned media. During his period in power, however, Berlusconi was frequently criticized for trying to extend his media control beyond the Mediaset channels, bringing pressure to bear also on the publicly-owned RAI television channels. This, his critics alleged, gave Berlusconi control of almost all television sources of information in Italy, ensuring favourable coverage for Berlusconi

● **Censorship**: A policy or act of control over what can be said, written, published or performed in order to suppress what is considered morally or politically unacceptable.

● ***Glasnost***: (Russian) Literally, 'openness' or 'transparency'; the liberalization of controls over political expression and the media.

personally and for the centre-right views of Forza Italia. Although the Italian example is unusual because of Berlusconi's joint role as media mogul and political leader, attempts by democratic politicians to exert influence over the media are by no means uncommon. Indeed, they have become routine in an emerging age of '**spin**' and news management.

Politics of spin

In addition to political biases that operate in and through the mass media, growing concern has been expressed about the closer relationship in modern politics between government and the media, and about how each uses the other for its own purposes. This has led to a transformation in the style and substance of political communication in democratic regimes, affecting both public opinion and, more widely, the political culture. Governments of whatever complexion have always had an unreliable relationship with truth. Politicians are concerned primarily with winning and retaining power, and are thus ever sensitive to the need to maintain public support. The desire to accentuate the positive and conceal the negative is therefore irresistible. In a liberal-democratic context, in which the existence of free media rules out 'official' propaganda and crude ideological manipulation, governments have come to shape the news agenda by new techniques for the control and dissemination of information, often described as 'news management' or 'political marketing'. The favourable presentation of information and policies, or what has come to be called 'spin', has thus become a major preoccupation of modern governments.

The art of 'spin', practised by so-called 'spin-doctors', has many facets. These include the following:

- the careful 'vetting' of information and arguments before release to the media
- the control of sources of information to ensure that only an official 'line' is presented
- the use of unattributable briefings or 'leaks'
- the feeding of stories only to sympathetic media sources
- the release of information close to media deadlines to prevent checking or the identification of counter-arguments
- the release of 'bad' news at times when other, more important events dominate the news agenda.

News management of this kind is most advanced in the USA, where it has become common for election strategists and campaign managers to take up senior White House posts, if their candidate wins the presidency. The Clinton administration was widely seen to have taken 'spin' and the skills of policy presentation to new and more sophisticated levels. The Blair government in the UK also devoted particular attention to the 'packaging' of politics, leading some to criticize it for being concerned more with style than with substance. Amongst the developments that occurred under Blair were the centralizing of government communications under the control of the prime minister's press office; a 'carrot and stick' approach to journalists, who were rewarded with information for sympathetic coverage but penalized for criticism; and the politicization of

● **Spin**: The presentation of information so as to elicit a desired response, or being 'economical with the truth'.

departmental information offices through the imposition of control from Downing Street. Blair also employed a former senior editor of a tabloid newspaper (Alistair Campbell) as his director of communications, 1997–2003, as did David Cameron, 2007–10, (Andy Coulson).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the media have been reluctant or passive players in the development of news management. The media need government as much as government needs the media. Government has always been an important source of news and information, but its role has become even more vital as the expansion in media outlets – television channels, websites, magazines and newspapers – has created greater pressure for the acquisition of 'newsworthy' stories. In some cases, publishers, editors and journalists conspire with 'spin-doctors' to manage the news for mutual benefit. This was alleged in the UK in relation to the Blair government and the Murdoch press, as, for instance, the government's unwillingness to press ahead with privacy legislation coincided with the (temporary) conversion of, first, the *Sun*, the UK's largest selling tabloid, and then *The Times* into Labour-supporting newspapers.

In addition to undermining the rigour and independence of political reporting, the advent of media-orientated government has a range of other implications. Some, for example, argue that it strengthens democracy by allowing government to deal with the public more directly and to respond more effectively to popular views and concerns. Others, however, see it as a threat to the democratic process, in that it widens the scope for manipulation and dishonesty, and weakens the role of representative institutions such as assemblies or parliaments. Moreover, it may engender apathy and undermine interest in conventional forms of political activity; in particular, voting and party membership. This occurs because 'spin', style and presentation themselves become the focus of media attention, strengthening the image of government as a vast publicity machine that is disengaged from the lives and concerns of ordinary people.

SUMMARY

- There are rival theories of the media's political impact. Pluralists portray the media as an ideological marketplace that enhances debate and electoral choice. However, others highlight systematic media bias, stemming either from links between the media and economic and social elites, or from the personal views of the editor, broadcasters and journalists. The market model suggests that the media output simply reflects the views of the general public.
- The media play a key democratic role in four senses. They promote political education by providing a public forum for meaningful and serious debate; act as a public watchdog, exposing abuses of power; tend, through the 'new' media in particular, to widen access to information and facilitate political activism; and serve as a mechanism through which democracy takes place. Concerns have, nevertheless, been raised about the political views of the media, their lack of democratic accountability and their over-close links to government.
- The mass media has affected governance in various ways. These include that they have transformed political leadership and, in the process, reapportioned government power. They have also changed the political culture and, some have warned, contributed to declining respect for politicians and politics in general. Finally, the growing influence of the media is evident in a policy-making process that has to react more rapidly and make sense of a vast amount of information.
- The use of new media has been defended on the grounds that it facilitates political participation, widens citizen's access to information, and stimulates new forms of decentralized political activism. Critics, nevertheless, warn against the growth of a consumerist form of citizenship and doubt the value of 'technological fixes'.
- The role of the media in promoting globalization has provoked particular controversy. Some have warned against 'media imperialism', drawing attention to the media's role in spreading a global culture of consumerism and in strengthening 'westernization or 'Americanization'. However, cultural exchange facilitated by the mass media is by no means always a 'top-down' or one-way process.
- Governments have sometimes used the media as a propaganda machine. This involves direct control over all kinds of media output to ensure that only 'official' views and ideas are distributed. Classic examples of this can be found in Nazi Germany and in communist regimes, but there has been a growing tendency for democratic regimes to engage in news management and the politics of 'spin', providing evidence of a symbiotic relationship that tends to develop between government and the media.

Questions for discussion

- Is civic culture a cause or a consequence of effective democratic rule?
- Do the mass media reflect public opinion or shape it?
- Is a free media vital for democratic rule?
- How has the media changed the nature of political leadership? Are leaders stronger or weaker as a result?
- What is new about the 'new' media?
- Is the media an agent of cultural homogenization?
- Do all governments use propaganda, or only some?
- Are modern governments more concerned with political marketing than with political performance?

Further reading

Almond, G. A. and S. Verba (eds), *The Civic Culture Revisited* (1989). An updated version of the authors' classic 1963 analysis of the conditions required for democratic stability.

Jenkins, H. and D. Thorburn (eds), *Democracy and New Media* (2004). A wide-ranging collection of essays that discuss, from a variety of perspectives, the relationship between democracy and cyberspace.

Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). A highly influential anaysis of the decline of civic engagement and social participation in the USA.

Street, J., *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*, 2nd edn (2011). A readable and wide-ranging overview of all aspects of the relationship between the media and politics.