



DIGITAL NEWS: GENIE'S LAMP OR PANDORA'S BOX? JAMIE COWLING

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“As with every other genre in the digital universe, news providers are beset by increased competition, declining audiences and fragmenting revenues. One result is that serious news values are coming under increasing strain.”
Michael Grade, Chairman of the BBC, January 2005

“It is a press of enormous energy, a press of enormous diversity and plurality. More people read newspapers in this country than most other countries. You, as representatives of democracy, I should think should be very pleased at such an energetic and diverse press.”
Paul Dacre, Editor-in-Chief, Associated Newspapers, February 2003

Introduction

For news junkies the 2005 General Election promises to be one where you've never had it so good. There is more choice of channels, more news, more journalists with deeper access than ever before. The news on the surface is in rude health and yet the suspicion remains that our democracy is not. The future should be bright. Technological developments in the production and transmission of news and information continue apace and we have yet to exploit the full potential of those that are already here. Journalists can dig deeper and report faster, in greater depth from further than ever before. New technologies and techniques are enabling more complex relationships to be formed with readers, viewers and listeners. They in turn are producing and sharing “news” with one another, sometimes even with formal news institutions.

But at the zenith of the independent media's power, for some all is doom and gloom. For centuries progressives have fought for the free press, for freedom of information and ultimately a democratisation of the power to share information. But we are more likely to read excoriating critiques of ‘laser guided journalism’ (Lloyd 2004a) that takes place in a ‘universe of soundbites and isolated incidents used inaccurately as examples of the norm’ (Atkins 2005) than to revel in our new-found wealth of information.¹ The news media once considered to be so essential to democracy are said to be using their current strength to deliver a kicking to the body politic.

So while one analysis would appear to show a picture of rude health, others remain convinced that we are undergoing a crisis of democratic communication. We need to consider to what extent these anxieties are related to the disruptive impact of the switch from analogue to digital news.

Digital technologies have impacted and disrupted established traditions in the production, dissemination and consumption of news and current affairs programming. The key change has been to remove previously existing bottlenecks in both space

and time (Tambini & Cowling 2004; Collins & Murrone 1996). Journalists are now able to report from further afield, more quickly and in more depth thanks to mobile technologies. Today colour presses mean newspapers are more lively than before. New technology means that newspapers can be produced later in the day with more pages and distributed faster. First analogue and later digital cable and satellite have removed the constraints posed by spectrum scarcity for broadcast news: with more channels, often from outside of national boundaries, providing more news from (and to) around the globe. Ultimately, citizens have more choice of more news from more providers than ever before.

But perhaps most dramatic of all has been the arrival of the internet, which could potentially create a more democratic news media system by removing many of the barriers to communication. For the first time since the mass industrialisation of the news it is now possible to communicate cheaply on a one-to-one, one-to-many and a many-to-one basis. Of course, significant economic and social barriers remain but there has undoubtedly been an expansion in the number of voices heard by others.

All agree that in Digital Britain news has changed and is likely to continue to do so, but very few agree on what the impact of these changes might be. While the technology itself is value neutral we need to understand what link there is, if any, between the impact of new digital technology and changes to the market structure, outputs and outcomes.

Box 1 - Extract from the Communications Act (2003) and BBC Agreement (1996)

'(1) It shall be the principal duty of OFCOM, in carrying out their functions (a) to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters; and....'

'(c) that those services (taken together)¹ provide, to the extent that is appropriate for *facilitating civic understanding and fair and well-informed debate on news and current affairs*, a comprehensive and authoritative coverage of news and current affairs in, and in the different parts of, the United Kingdom and from around the world;'

Communications Act 2003 3.1a & 264.6c

'3.2 The requirements... are that the Home Services -

(c) contain comprehensive, authoritative and impartial coverage of news and current affairs in the United Kingdom and throughout the world *to support fair and informed debate* at local, regional and national levels....'

BBC Agreement 1996, 3.2(c)

There are three macro-questions for thoughtful policymakers, regulators and professionals moving forwards. Firstly, how has the change in the market structure impacted on the size and health of the public sphere at the local, national and global level? The second concerns the benefits of greater competition of news sources. Democratic theory has traditionally argued the benefits for citizens of a plurality of voices in the news media. Basic economic theory has also pointed to the benefits of competition on market actors, and therefore products for consumers. So what has

been the impact of increasing competition on news professionals, news output and citizens?

The third question relates to the rights and responsibilities of journalists in the digital age. As more citizens take on the traditional role of the professional journalist do the current analogue rights (and responsibilities) need to evolve with them? As journalists increasingly operate in a global space, for example facing libel writs in countries far from their base of operations, do we need to reconsider global rights and responsibilities?

We need to examine and unpick some of the key questions. These could include: **[draft only for discussion]**

Inputs and Outputs

- Where have digital technologies particularly impacted on news output and how?
- How much pluralism is enough? Can there be too much?
- How much quality/how many outlets can a market sustain?

Facilitating civic understanding and fair and well-informed debate on news and current affairs?

- How much information is enough to make active and informed choices?
- At what level and what size does the public sphere need to be to make informed choices?
- Does it matter if news and information is provided by informed citizens rather than professional journalists?
- Those who watch, listen and read news are more likely to vote. But why are people turning off and tuning out of news?
- Does regulation still matter?

Looking to the future

- How is news likely to develop into the 21st Century?
- Is the current situation an aberration or a structural shift?
- If “journalism” is changing what does this mean for the framework of rights and responsibilities that surrounds the news media?
- What can be done to empower people’s future decision making?

Project Aims

- How should codes develop into the future?
- How and where does regulation need to change?
- Recommendations for development of wider policy levers such as media literacy, citizenship etc.

This Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) position paper attempts to provide background and clarity of purpose for the debate as part of the ippr *Manifesto for a Digital Britain* project. It sets out why the news media are important and will continue to be so in the 21st century, if not in their current form. It begins to sketch a platform neutralⁱⁱ framework for assessing the performance of the news media rather than one based on the form of delivery. It provides a summary of the current key critiques and responses. It sets out a structure for looking at where and how digital technologies sit and the key questions for the future.

1) Why news and information is important

Asking why news is important is likely to bring blank looks, certainly amongst the kind of people who read ippr policy pamphlets. But it is one we should have an answer to. Because, put simply, more and more people are asking themselves the question and answering “it’s not”. According to newspaper sales figures and audience data regular attention to news is becoming a minority pursuit.ⁱⁱⁱ More and more are choosing to read *Nuts*, watch *Friends* or listen to Usher than read Michael Gove, watch Jon Snow or listen to Jim Naughtie. This trend is seriously calling into doubt that the population are engaging with the news media enough to ‘facilitat[e] civic understanding and fair and well-informed debate on news and current affairs’ (Communication Act 2003: 264.6c).

Where most discussions of the impact of digital technologies on the news media fail is through not establishing clear terms at the outset: what democracy requires from our news media and why it is important. According to a recent World Bank report:

In modern economies and societies, the availability of information is central to better decision making by citizens and consumers. In political markets, citizens require information about candidates to make intelligent voting choices. In economic markets, including financial markets, consumers and investors require information to select products and securities. The availability of information is a crucial determinant of the efficiency of political and economic markets.^{iv}

(Djankov et al. 2001: 2)

We can expand this into the following four points:

1. A condition of active citizenship

To be a citizen you need to be informed of the world around you, in order to take reasonable and responsible decisions in a democracy. The news forms an important and unique conduit of information to individual citizens. News is de-personalised; you don’t know the teller. News is told from a position of claimed expertise; journalists claim to be experts or at least know more about the topic than you. News is claimed to be important; the reason that you are reading it is because you should know. News is shared; when you read the news you know that lots of other people who you have never met know the news. Sometimes, the news claims to be an impartial voice.

2. A condition of good government

Governments need to be kept informed of the ongoing needs and wants of citizens during policy formulation. An informed and active population and media results in more efficient government (despite appearances to the contrary) because those who wield power are more likely to be effective the closer they are to the problems, events and attitudes of the citizens which they govern (Milner & Ersson 2000).

3. A condition of well functioning markets

Markets require information to be provided to inform prospective purchasers’ future decisions. Perfectly efficient markets can only exist under conditions of perfect information, although that level of perfection can never be created in reality. Paradoxically perhaps, the invisible hand thrives on visible actors (Arrow & Debreu 1954).

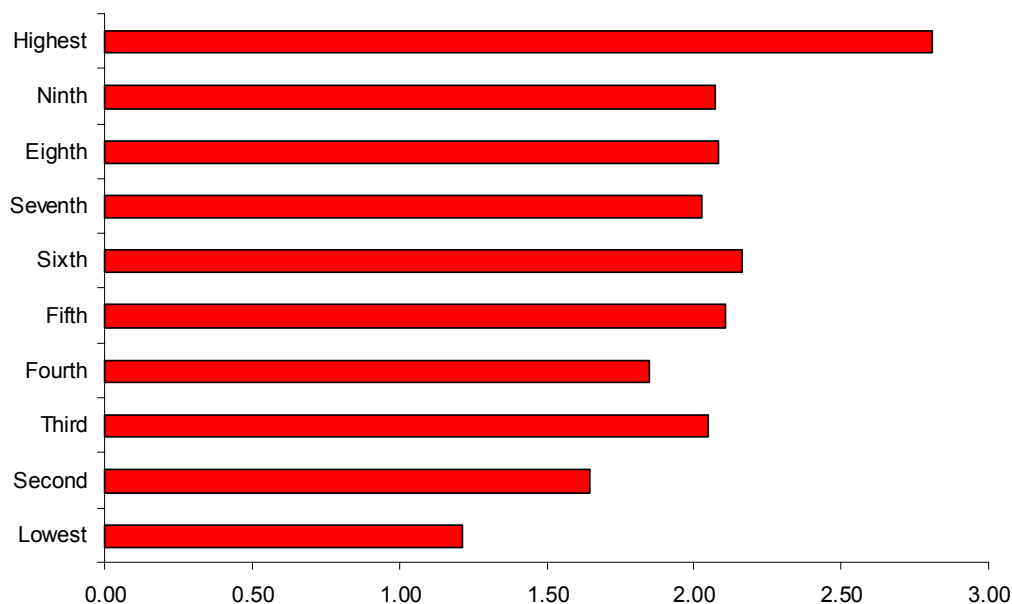
4. A question of social justice

Access to high quality information on which to base your choice of representative in a democracy for all groups in society is essential in a democracy. The more informed you are the more likely you are to participate (Lassen 2004). Participation by already advantaged groups may in the end be bad for democracy as it skews the reactions of those in power towards the wants of the already advantaged (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Television news is particularly important here. Eveland & Scheufele maintain that,

Rather than providing information that is potentially useful in mobilizing a broad cross section of citizens during campaigns, newspapers seem to provide information that disproportionately benefits individuals who are already more likely to engage in participatory activities, that is, the more educated strata of society.
(Eveland & Scheufele, 2000: 231).

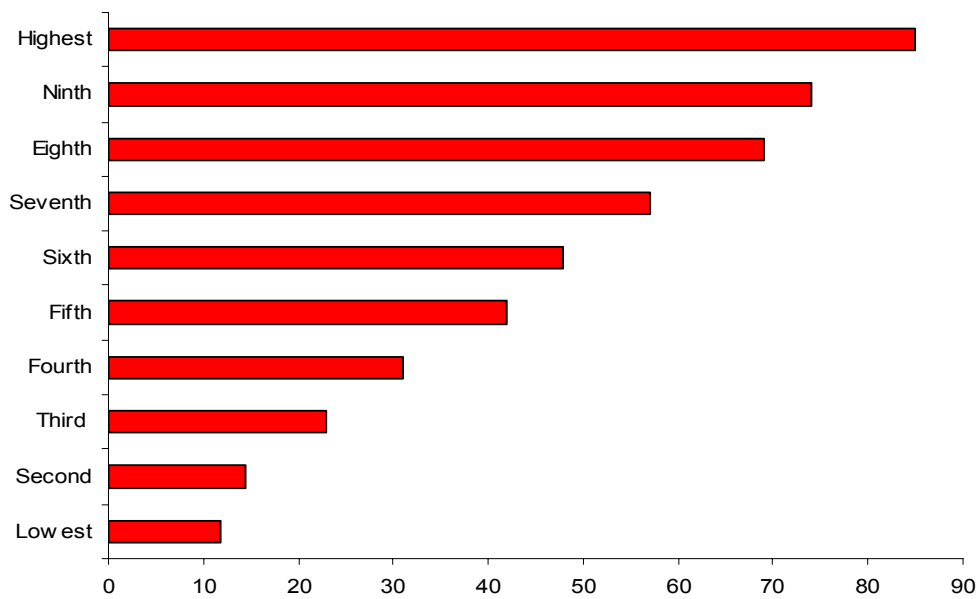
We can assume that the news and information sources provided over the internet will have a similar disproportionate benefit for those already likely to engage in participatory activities. In 2002-2003, household internet access is lowest in the bottom two income groups (12 and 14 per cent respectively). 86 per cent of households within the highest income decile group have home internet access (National Statistics 2004 - see Figure 2 below).^v Skews in levels of basic literacy will have an ongoing impact.

Figure 1 – Weekly UK Household Expenditure on all Newspapers by Income Decile 2000/01



Pounds spending per week 2001 market prices
(Source: National Statistics FES 2000/01)

Figure 2 – UK Household Internet Access by Gross Income Decile 2004



Any internet access in the home
(Source: National Statistics FES 2004)

2) What roles should the news media perform?

Civic forum

The news media should function as a civic forum for pluralistic debate in the sense suggested by German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas.^{vi} This means providing extensive political coverage which is widely available with a diversity of sources. The news media should also provide a channel of communication for the public to government as for the government to the public. This is of particular importance given the attention paid by politicians to the news media as a proxy for the public voice (Herbst, 1998).

Watchdog

The most commonly known role of the news media is that it should function as a watchdog of the powerful, in Lord Macaulay's terms the Fourth Estate. Thus providing, in theory, an impartial critical analysis of public events and government and opposition policy. In practice there should be pluralistic competition amongst news sources and a wide variety of news sources available to the citizen. This is why it was important for broadcast news to be impartial while the availability of radio spectrum limited the total number of broadcast news providers (Tambini & Cowling 2002).

Active citizenship

The news media should encourage participation in the democratic process and act as a mobilizing agent. The news media should encourage learning about the political process and provide practical knowledge to citizens about the probable consequences of their actions. (The analogy is that to get the train from London Bridge to Charlton I need practical knowledge, how to read a timetable/how to buy a ticket/how to find the platform and but not how to drive the train/thermodynamics etc.) This requires reasonable political information to be provided at different levels

accessible to all citizens; for a country to have a well functioning news media system there should be room for *The Sun* as well as *The Financial Times*.

Perhaps surprisingly for such a contentious subject it would seem that most people, even politicians and journalists, can agree on what the news media should do. They simply disagree about whether it is doing it. From the important examples of Gilligan and 'Death on the Rock', to the ridiculous rows of the day-to-day, these are in essence disagreements over whether the news media is balancing the complex demands its democratic responsibilities and commercial imperatives place upon it.

3) Why look at it now?

The move from the analogue to the digital world compels us to make choices as a society that we have not faced in the past. While wider political and industry professionals' concern is important, it is not the fundamental reason that choices have to be made. What the current debates should do is guide us in our decisions.

Concern about the news media is neither new nor novel. Thomas Jefferson is alleged to have said that "the man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers". However, there is a clear political and industry professional driver for current attention; both politicians and journalists are losing the public. Political concern has been driven by the record low turnout at the 2001 General Election and the ongoing falls in turnout at local and European elections. See Box 2 below. Thoughtful politicians are not simply blaming the messenger but looking at the news as part of the apparatus of British democracy as a whole. According to Lord Puttnam is 'time for a fresh start in the relationship between Parliament, the Press and the People' (Puttnam 2005).

Box 2 - Sources of political concern

- In 2001 General Election in general, people who were under 34 were less likely to vote than those in older age groups;
- Political interest among young people is low, with only one in three 12-19 year olds expressing an interest in politics;
- 18% of people would trust politicians to tell the truth (compared to 53% for "ordinary man on the street").

Source: Spectrum 2005

Journalists and those that make their money from news should be concerned by the rapid fall in viewers, listeners and readers, a fall particularly pronounced amongst the young. Journalists have to elbow aside more competitors than ever before for a smaller slice of an ever shrinking cake.

In a recent speech Alan Rusbridger, editor of *The Guardian* argued:

Only a blind optimist could tell you that everything is currently blooming in the national newspaper industry. The overall story of paid-for newspaper circulations is that they are, and have been for some time, in decline. In order to maintain, never mind grow, national circulations, most publishers - including the Guardian - are forced to spend larger and larger sums on bulk

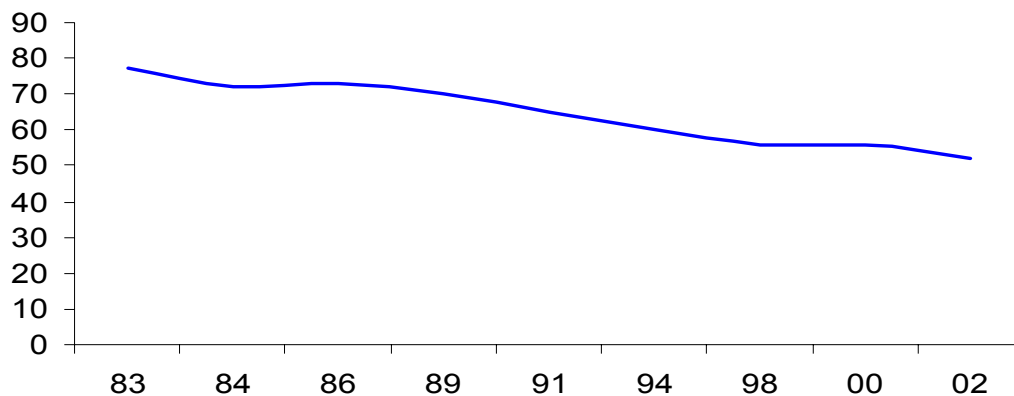
sales (the copies you find on trains, planes and hotels), foreign sales, cut-price subscriptions and promotions involving CDs, books, dream cottages and DVDs.

(Rusbridger 2005)

Rusbridger went on to make an explicit link between poor public trust in print journalism and falling sales.

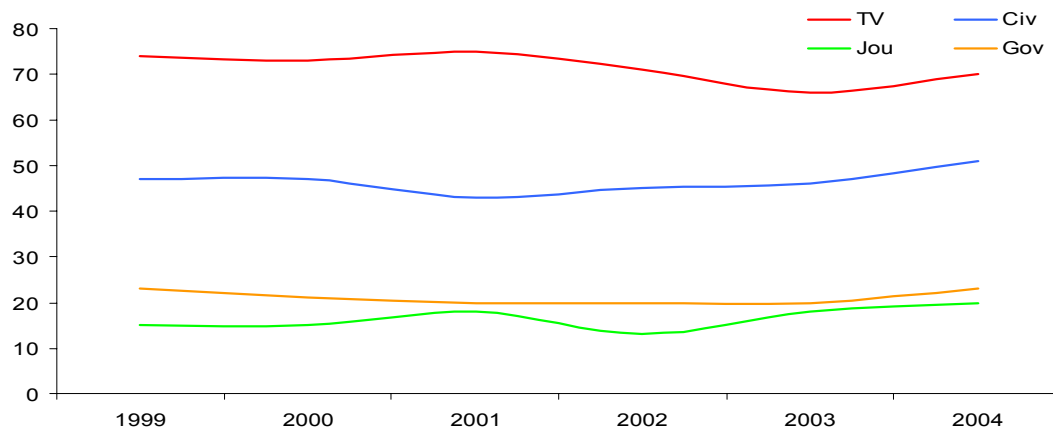
Despite British adults demonstrating higher levels of television viewing, newspaper reading and radio listening than the EU average (Dacre 2003) this does not translate in to more time spent watching, reading or listening to current affairs, politics and news shows (Delaney 2005). Related to both drivers is the recent attention given to research that suggests members of the public place less trust in journalists and Government Ministers than the popular dodgy dealers of renown, the estate agent and second hand car salesmen.

Figure 3 - National & local newspaper reading UK population per cent 3+ times per week



(Source: Eurobarometer *cf.* Curtice 2005)

Figure 4 - Public Trust in TV journalists, Civil Servants, Journalists & Government Ministers 1999 - 2004



“Do you trust X to tell the truth?”

(Source: Mori, 1999 – 2004)

The question of trust can be overlaid and is probably more complex than much of current public debate allows (see Appendix 1). What is unarguable is that the news has changed as a result of the use of digital technologies in the collection, transmission and reception of news and information in the 21st century. However, there are clear divisions over whether the impact of digital technologies have been beneficial, disastrous or even unimportant compared to wider social change.

What is clear is that technology means that we have to make choices that weren't there in the analogue world. Going back is not an option. To move forward, what is clearly required is a stock-take of what's new, what's not and what matters.

4) Critiques and responses

Below presents a short, and inevitably incomplete, summary of some of the key critiques and responses grouped under the heading *mediamalaise* (itself a term coined in the 1970s). What is striking is how technology is ever-present but rarely, outside of the internet prophets, in the foreground of the debate. Both the critiques and the counter-arguments have to some extent suffered not only truncation but also artificial separation for the sake of clarity.

Critiques

The variety of critiques mirrors the choice provided by the digital media and some are as old as the critics themselves. As early as 1979 Jimmy Carter bemoaned the “crisis of confidence that threatening to destroy the fabric of modern America”. More recently Agnes Callamard, Executive Director of Article 19, summarises the separate critiques arguing that, “commercial pressures and media concentration have resulted the world over, including in the UK, in increased ‘sponsored’ journalism, erosion of public-service broadcasting, and the rise in populist and entertainment reporting” (Callamard 2005).

1. It's TV stupid

Critiques from the United States tend to focus on the coming of television, the medium not the message, as a direct cause of a perceived “dumbing down”. Television, it is said, is privatising our lives and we are in serious danger of amusing ourselves to death (Postman 1987). It is apparent that moving pictures can't provide a quality Panorama.

Robert Putnam's influential book, *Bowling Alone* (2000) is closely associated with this critique. Putnam argues that the two great leisure trends of the 21st century have been individualisation and personalisation. Both have undermined social capital, the social ties that bind us together. While newspapers are considered to be positive forces for civic engagement readership is declining. The villain of the piece is television: Putnam's evidence shows that for every additional hour that Americans spend watching television, their level of civic participation falls by 10% (Putnam 2000: 228). It is worth quoting his conclusion at length:

Americans at the end of the twentieth century were watching more TV, watching it more habitually, more pervasively, and more often alone, and watching more programmes that were associated specifically with civic disengagement (entertainment as distinct from news). The onset of these trends coincided exactly with the decline in social connectedness, and the trends were most marked among the younger generation that are

distinctively disengaged. Moreover, it is precisely those Americans most marked by this dependence on televised entertainment who were more likely to have dropped out of civic and social life (Putnam 2000: 246).

He does not consider the internet in depth, given that it was only just beginning its permeation of mainstream society during the years that his study was taking place.

2. *Commercialisation, tabloidization & “Dumbing Down”*

Some suggest that as competition has increased, the news media have “dumbed down” content in an effort to increase, or even simply maintain, audiences. This is often characterised as adopting a tabloid agenda with a focus on crime stories, personality driven stories and consumer coverage. The tone of news is also thought to become more sensationalist and dramatic rather than the “serious” considered and analytical agenda of yesteryear. In the words of the BBC newsreader Michael Buerk, news is becoming “coarser, shallower, more trivial, more prurient, more inaccurate, more insensitive, with each passing year” (Buerk 2005).

3. *Power and Concentration*

Carl Bernstein, one of the two Washington post journalists who broke the Watergate scandal that brought down President Nixon, has become increasingly concerned with the rising power of the media and concurrent concentration of this power in the hands of the few not the many. “We need to start asking the same fundamental questions about the press that we do of the other powerful institutions of this society – about who is served, about standards, about self-interest and its eclipse of the public interest” (cf. Macdonald 1992). In his anatomy of 21st century Britain, Anthony Sampson found that “No sector increased its power in Britain more rapidly than the media...The hacks came in from the cold, not through the back door, but up the grand staircase.” (Sampson 2004: 207) The media Barons have always been powerful but could digital technologies have enabled greater economies of scale and scope in the news media industry and therefore increase their power?

4. *The decline of Public Service Broadcasting*

A great deal of attention has been focused upon the decline of public service broadcasting, one writer compared the increasing commercialization of the media with the triumph of the *Whermacht* in 1940 (Tracey 1998: 34), suggesting that public service news is better than commercial news. There is some evidence to support this (Holtz-Bacha & Norris 2001). But this fails to account for the arguably innovative and salutary impact of new market entrants in some fields, Sky News is well regarded by the vast majority, and is rarely taken to its logical extension in calling for public service print media.

5. *The 3rd Age political communication*

It has been argued that we are entering a third age of political communication characterised by intensified professionalisation of political-media relationships, increased competitive pressures, anti-elitist populism, a process of ‘centrifugal diversification’, and changes in how people receive politics (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). The fractious nature of relationships between politicians, journalists and the population are likely to get worse rather than better.

6. *The Danger of the Daily Me*

In *Republic.com* Cass Sunstein argues that people tend to look for information that interests them and opinions that re-enforce their own prejudices so the personalisation enabled by digital media means that the ego replaces the egalitarian.

Republic.com and “Egopedia” signal the decline of the mass public. Nations, some argue, will become polarised by opinion and communities of interest will replace communities of responsibility. Sunstein argues that new technology will require a reassessment of what makes for a well-functioning system of free expression arguing that “above all, I urge that in a diverse society, such a system requires far more than restraints on government censorship and respect for individual choices” (Sunstein 2001).

7. *The new realism*

Several influential figures have recently been arguing that the media, and in particular the print media, live in a wholly different environment to the rest of society with a different *weltanschauung*. In a speech to ippr Peter Hain, Leader of the House of Commons and Secretary of State for Wales, argued that there has been a paradigm shift in media-political relations.

But something else more fundamental has been developing. Politicians, news broadcasters and journalists now form a "political class" which is in a frenzied world of its own, completely divorced from the people, and which is turning off viewers, listeners and readers from politics by the million.(Hain 2004).

The new realism is typified by John Lloyd’s prominent critique *What the Media are Doing to Our Politics* (Lloyd 2004b). Lloyd argues that the media have become not only an alternative power centre but that their unrelenting negativity is creating widespread cynicism. He argues that the media have to change to take greater responsibility for the health of democracy.

The philosopher Onora O’Neill in her influential 2002 Reith lectures pointed to the different standards that the print media are held to in comparison to the rest of society. She argued that:

Newspaper editors and journalists are not held accountable.... Outstanding reporting and accurate writing mingle with editing and reporting that smears, sneers and jeers, names, shames and blames. Some reporting 'covers' (or should I say 'uncovers'?) dementing amounts of trivia, some misrepresents, some denigrates, some teeters on the brink of defamation. In this curious world, commitments to trustworthy reporting are erratic: there is no shame in writing on matters beyond a reporter's competence, in coining misleading headlines, in omitting matters of public interest or importance, or in re-circulating others' speculations as supposed 'news'. Above all there is no requirement to make evidence accessible to readers.
(O’Neill 2002)

Counter-Arguments

Responses to the critiques set out above are neither always responses to the direct questions raised nor are they necessarily answers to a problem. What all share in common is, if not always optimistic, a neutral viewpoint.

1. *Don't shoot the messenger*

Some argue that the news media far from being powerful are constantly in danger from politicians and, more recently, judges locking down freedom of speech. The news media exists to expose corruption and serial incompetence at the heart of government. If there is something rotten in the state then it is to be found in

Westminster rather than Fleet Street. The only reason that our political leaders aren't caught with hands in the till/pants down/lying (delete as appropriate) is because the news asks "why is the bastard lying to me?" on behalf of the public.

2. *Television isn't all bad*

Academics have spent some time attempting to rebut Putnam's research. Television *per se* isn't all bad, it depends on what you watch. It would appear that television news and factual programming both informs and mobilizes the electorate (Semetko 2000; Scammell 2000; Wilkins 2000; Newton 1999; Norris 1996), having the added benefit of closing the knowledge gap between the haves and have nots (Eveland & Scheufele 2000). There is also counter-evidence to Putnam's claim that the amount of time spent watching television impacts negatively on citizens' inclination to participate (Wilkins 2000).

3. *A Virtuous Circle*

Pippa Norris in her influential and important book *A Virtuous Circle?: Political communications in post-industrial societies* argues that what we all know for certain is that no news is not good news (Norris 2000). It is too simplistic to suggest that the news is simply bad and dangerous. All other things being equal the more you watch, listen or read the news the more likely you are to be an active citizen. As long as the system is providing a plurality of information sources at different levels then the system is working well. Looking at outcomes beyond electoral turnout, for example new forms of citizen activism, suggests that far from being apathetic the population is engaged. 24-hour news, the internet and the wider impact of digital technologies have been broadly positive (Norris 2000).

More news means more active citizens. According to the latest Eurobarometer data the UK is becoming a country where political matters are now being discussed more frequently and more in line with EU averages. Previous Eurobarometer results showed a very low level of political discussion in the U.K. but in the spring 2003 survey, a substantial increase is noted: 16% of those polled in the UK said they discussed politics frequently. This is now slightly ahead of the EU average of 15% and a substantial increase on the UK's 9% in the previous Eurobarometer 58.1 of the autumn of 2002 (Eurobarometer 2003).

4. *Realists*

Some, like Michael Schudson in *The Power of News*, suggest that those who argue that there is a problem are taking an ahistorical approach (Schudson 1995). The news media has exercised power without responsibility throughout the ages. Despite evidence of recent failures from Jayson Blair in the New York Times to Dow Carbide on the BBC, there is no evidence to suggest that anything is either better or worse than before. Furthermore, those who wring their hands over declining turnout and the failure of active citizenship do not understand the changing nature of what it is to be a citizen in the 21st century.

In his latest book, *The Good Citizen*, Schudson argues that "academic and journalistic discourse about citizenship is deeply mired in ruts worn in our thought during the Progressive Era. This blinds us to the virtues of trust-based, party-based, and rights-based models of citizenship in its dogged emphasis on a rationalistic, information-based model" (Schudson 1999).

The news, by virtue of its role as a watchdog of the powerful, will always be berated and even hated by those in power. Responding directly to John Lloyd's critique the respected journalist Roy Greenslade wrote in *The Guardian*:

Dislike of newspapers has united liberals and conservatives, capitalists and communists, citizens and consumers. Such consistent criticism over such a long period would suggest that John Lloyd's thesis is flawed. He appears not to have taken on board the fact that journalism has always been under attack and that journalists have always been despised...By its nature journalism is anti-establishment, intrusive and confrontational. However high-minded its practitioners, the result is inevitably viewed by those in authority - whether in government or in business, in institutions or the professions - as, at best, unhelpful, and at worst, an act of treason.

(Greenslade 2005)

5. *New media means new news*

Some accept the critiques, but argue that new media provide solutions. From some perspectives, once the broadband cavalry arrives over the horizon, public-spirited wired-up citizens will wrest control of the news agenda from the elite and share tales of real rather than imagined communities. "Big Media... it was a gravy train while it lasted, but it was unsustainable.... The communication network itself will be a medium for everyone's voice..." (Gillmor 2004: xiii).

Until recently the new news media looked broadly analogous to the old news media (but without the revenues). However, commentators are suggesting that the real revolution, in news at least, has come with the invention and reasonably wide spread adoption of the weblog or "blog". In a sure sign that the blog has left the IT department and is now right at the heart of the political world, former Conservative party leader Iain Duncan Smith recently wrote on the subject. Duncan Smith argues that the blog can re-energise political news saying that:

Until now voters, viewers and service users have not had easy mechanisms by which to expose officialdom's errors and inefficiencies. But, because of the internet, the masses beyond the metropolitan fringe will soon be on the move. They will expose the lazy journalists who reduce every important public policy issue to how it affects opinion-poll ratings.

(Duncan Smith 2005)

Box 3 – How news blogs can feed into the wider news media

In January 2005 as world leaders gathered to commemorate the Holocaust at Auschwitz bemused Labour party members were emailed and invited to a website to choose which of a series of posters they thought best denigrated the Tories. A British political *blog*, November5th, pointed out that the Labour Party's proposed poster campaign could be perceived to be anti-Semitic; Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin the Tory leader and shadow Chancellor respectively are Jewish. Not for the first time Guido Fawkes cutting commentary was plagiarised by professional print journalists in the following day's papers (the posting even included a call, ultimately in vain, for Farringdon Road to credit where credit was due). The story moved to the broadcast media and two days of the usual accusations and denials followed and the posters were pulled.

Weblogs introduce a number of new technological functions to the way news is produced, consumed and managed:

- New feedback/input mechanism to mainstream news media, as old and new media are increasingly parasitic on one another. A large amount of blogging is that which offers links to and opinions on news stories. Meanwhile, switched-on newspapers see weblogs as a way of catching emerging news stories or trends;
- Greater fact checking of mainstream news media by members of the public;
- Reduction of mainstream news media's reliance on official sources (primary definers);
- Most importantly of all, a new form of news and news organisations;
- New interactive relationships between groups of readers that are not spatially limited and are less limited by time;
- Blogs invert traditional editorial processes. With old media, editing precedes publication; with blogs, publication precedes editing (which then occurs through reputation, Google and aggregators such as Blogdex).

The old media are using the techniques of blogging to change the nature of their reporting and relationship with readers during the 2005 UK General Election campaign. Both *The Times* and the BBC Radio 4 *Today Programme* have invited readers and listeners to blog for them during the campaign.

6. *The Daily We: how news and information on the internet actually works*

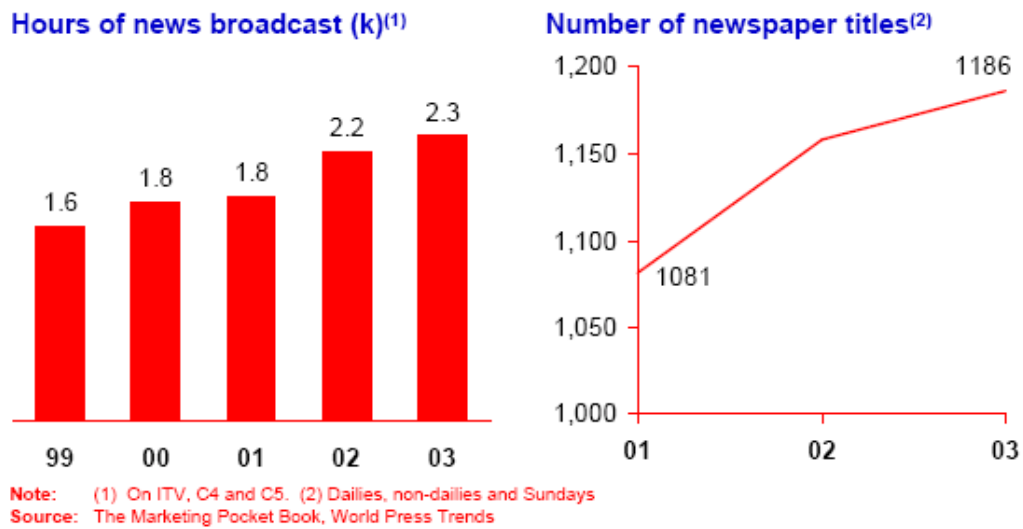
A recent study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project 'The Internet and Democratic Debate' found that far from the personalisation feared by the *Daily Me*, during the 2004 Presidential Election campaign internet users sought out a *wider* range of information sources and opposing views than non-internet users.

While all people like to see arguments that support their beliefs, internet users are not limiting their information exposure to views that buttress their opinions. Instead, wired Americans are more aware than non-internet users of all kinds of arguments, even those that challenge their preferred candidates and issue positions. Some of the increase in overall exposure merely reflects a higher level of interest in politics among internet users. However, even when we compare Americans who are similar in interest in politics and similar in demographic characteristics such as age and education, our main findings still hold. Internet users have greater overall exposure to political arguments and they also hear more challenging arguments.

(Horrigan *et al.* 2004)

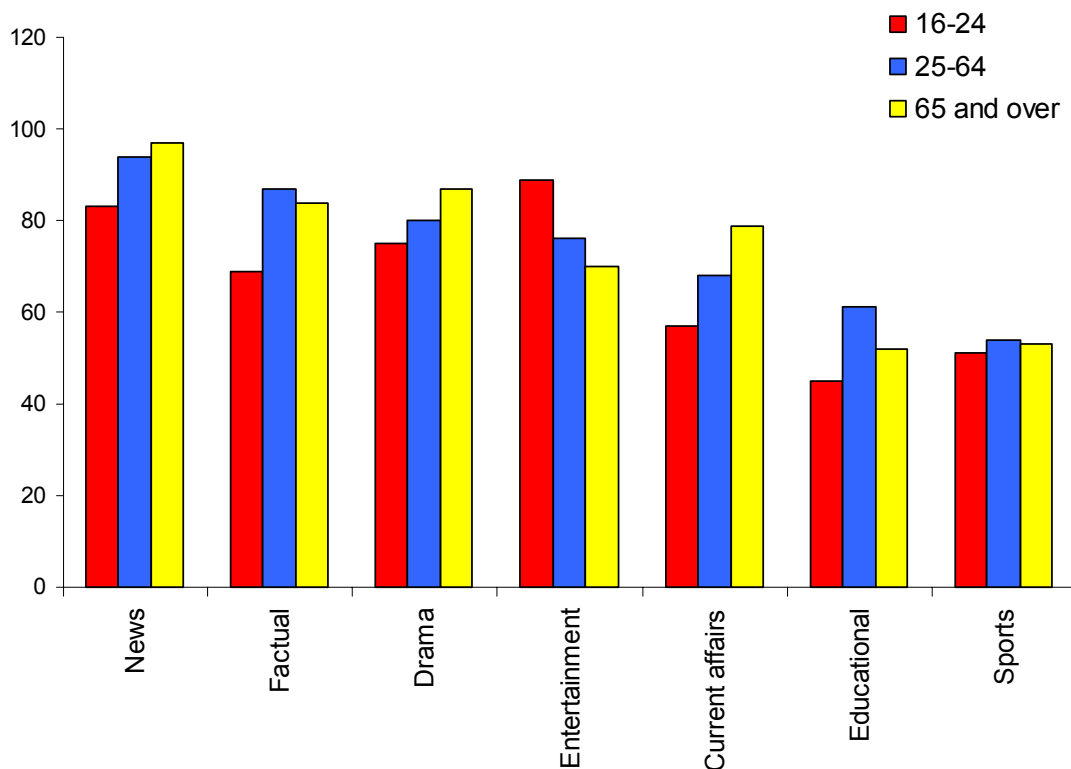
The internet, even for broadband users, acted as a compliment to television, radio and print news rather than a replacement. Of those who ever get their news online 99% also get news from newspaper or television. Broadband users' use of newspapers, television and radio as a source of news was not significantly lower than non-internet users. Television remained the main source of campaign news for broadband users; 73% of those with broadband at home cited television as their main source of campaign news against 89% of non-internet users. Broadband increases internet use; 64% of broadband internet users used the internet as a source of news on a daily basis during the election campaign compared to 43% of dial-up users. The internet increases use of non-traditional news media sources. 30% of internet users found information from websites such as MoveOn.org and the Christian Coalition during the campaign (Horrigan *et al.* 2004).

Figure 5 - Reasons to be cheerful (1): There is more news available than ever before



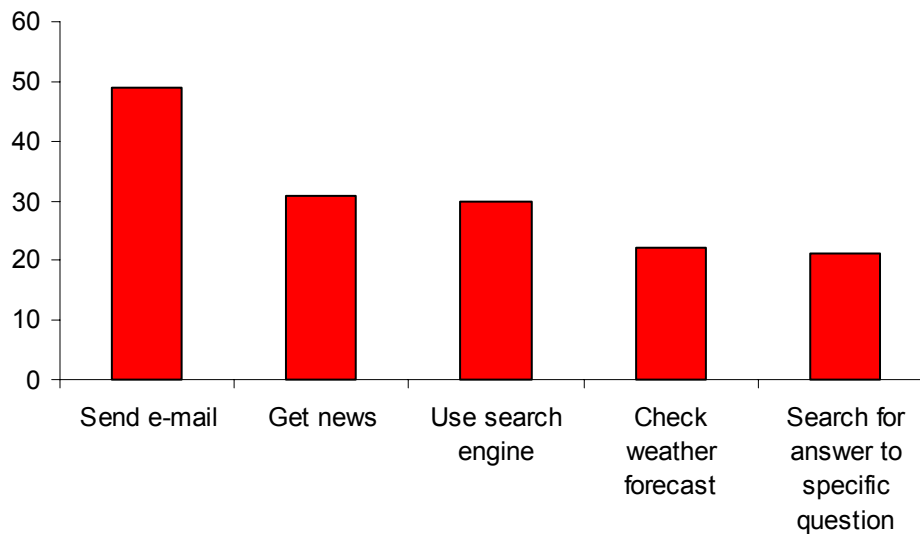
(Source: Spectrum 2005)

Figure 6 - Reasons to be cheerful (2): The public still tell pollsters that they think news is important



Those who said they were 'very' or 'fairly' interested in each type of programme.
 (Source: Independent Television Commission 2002)

Figure 7 - Reasons to be cheerful (3): Seeking out news & information are key reasons for using the internet



Daily activities undertaken by those with internet access when online (%) USA
(Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Jan 2005)

5) How might technological changes have affected the definition of 'News'?

Understanding the impact of the transition from the analogue to digital environment requires greater thought on what is news in the first place. This section sets out what is news using the widely accepted list of news values and then considers where digital technologies may have impacted on the news values themselves. Previous studies have tended to examine inputs and outputs (see above) rather than understand how digital technology may impact on news values first. Central to understanding the impact of digital technologies is the need to gain greater clarity around the interdependence between how news values are evolving and how news values drive the adoption and use of digital technology in the production and dissemination of news.

News is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as:

- 1) newly received or noteworthy information about recent events.
- 2) [The News] a broadcast or published news report.

To become newsworthy information should conform to more than one of the seven factors listed below. I have adapted the standard list of news values found in Curtis 2004.

- **Impact:** To be news, information has to be of general interest to a number of people whose lives will be influenced in some way by the subject of the story. The more people the more newsworthy it is. For instance, a bakery strike may have less impact than a postal strike. Subject to size of target market and/or links to target market see proximity below.

- **Timeliness:** News is new. Recent events have higher news value than earlier happenings. Of *particular value are stories brought to the public ahead of the competition*. This means urgency is particularly important in production and dissemination.
- **Prominence & Power:** For the same occurrence, people in the public eye have higher news value than obscure people. For example, we cared that Rt. Hon. Chris Smith MP had AIDS, while an ordinary person with AIDS would not have commanded the attention of the national news media. In other words, news is interested in or about the powerful see conflict below.
- **Proximity:** Stories about events and situations in one's home community are more newsworthy than events that take place far away.
- **Bizarreness:** A classic example of this is dog-bites-man vs. man-bites-dog. Man-bites-dog is more bizarre (See Reuters 2005 for example). Dog-bites-man usually is not news.
- **Conflict:** Strife is newsworthy. Strife can usually be found where there is power.
- **Currency:** More value is attributed to stories pertaining to issues or topics that are in the spotlight of public concern rather than to issues or topics about which people care less. Stories come and stories go after a while.

Where might digital technology have impacted on news values?

The quote from Michael Grade at the top of this paper argues that the impact of digital technology on the transmission of news, broadcast news in particular, that has enabled greater competition has led to falling audiences and fragmenting revenues. Of course, by greater competition he means greater consumer choice and consumers are choosing not to watch or listen to "serious" news and therefore fragmenting revenues (at least in the commercial sector). He argues that this, smaller audiences and smaller revenues, has placed "serious" news values under strain. He makes an explicit link between the market in which the news operates and the internal characteristics of the news itself. What is less clear is why this might be the case.

Where might digital technologies have impacted most on the news values set out above? As readers of *The Telegraph* know, new technologies that increase the speed the news reaches you are a key selling point for any news organisation.^{vii} The impact of digital technologies is on timeliness; digital technologies have increased the speed at which news can be collected and transmitted. The value of timeliness, that news is new, to consumers is suggested by the unpopularity of time shifting of news programmes by users of Personal Video Recorders (Alps 2005).

However, as Keohane and Nye have perceptively argued, it is not the speed of transmission of the message that has undergone the most radical transformation. A message sent by telegraph travels at a similar speed to one sent via email. The major change has been in, what they term, the *thickness* of communications (Keohane & Nye 2000). This means two things. First, that the thickness of the information itself; a mobile-to-mobile conversation conveys more rich information than a telegraph message. Broadband internet can convey more information than dial-up. Second, that the power first to send and later to receive information over long distances has been placed in the hands of the many and not the few. For example, in the 1980s mobile phones were confined to the rich and those with jobs that demanded the ability to communicate wherever whenever like journalists. Today mobiles are a pervasive technology across demographics. The fundamental recent change, in news terms at least, has been the ability of individual to communicate and

have a conversation with, at least in theory, the many unbounded by constraints of space and time. And in some cases even the powerful (the Big Conversation for example).

We might ask if the expansion of the news, more hours and more pages, has meant that those who have power and prominence are in the gaze of journalists more often than before. Perhaps the need for more content has made more individuals, with dubious claims to power beyond the prominence that the news confers upon them, newsworthy? Perhaps the need for more content means there is a need for more conflict?

Undoubtedly globalisation, and globalisation of the news media, has changed feelings of proximity. But this is more complex than is commonly suggested. Changing notions of spatial and social proximity are reflected in news and information consumption.

Globalisation of people drives interest in far-away lands. The tsunami of December 26th 2004 achieved such prominence not only because of the extraordinary scale of the tragedy, but partly because of the traditional Christmas lull and the large number of Western tourists in the region. But this isn't new. The first wave of globalisation, including mass migration, meant that readers in England were informed and interested in the state of India, or in Ireland in the USA, perhaps to an extent that they are not today. It should perhaps come as no surprise that social communities with recent family ties outside of the United Kingdom seek news sources that provide information that they remain *socially* if not spatially proximate to; the *Irish Independent* is still on sale in many newsagents in Peckham. It has long been known that people who feel or seek social proximity are forming communities of interest on the internet.

However, when considering the impact of the digital technology on the news media perhaps the most interesting question when considering the issue of proximity is the changing nature of local, national and supra-national news media. The new supra-national news media (as distinct from national or interest group news media operating across national boundaries) are yet to find an audience outside of certain specialised groups, for example the growing number cosmopolitans with specific interests (e.g. global financial information).

However, the economies of scope and scale open to the national media and migration of sources of revenue to new media are increasingly making traditional local news (broadcast and print) financially unviable even in wealthy markets.^{viii} So whilst perhaps the logic of proximity points to interest at the neighbourhood, town, and regional level the economics of news gathering points to greater national centralisation and concentration. This is, of course, a complex process. As national news becomes more important it can operate to confer greater status on "national" events (for example the Mayor of London insulting a local news reporter) and at the same time change the boundaries of our imagined communities.

The gap left by traditional news sources could be being replaced by new forms of news media that rely to a greater or lesser extent on volunteers. Community radio and television are one example. The internet could also be an important medium though successful experiments to-date have relied to a greater or lesser extent on public funding. See the Department for Education & Skills 'Wired-Up Communities' initiative for discussion (DfES 2004; Davies 2005). The crucial difference is the move from professional journalists towards citizen reporters.

That said we shouldn't fall into the trap of technological determinism here. As local political actors have lost power to the centre, citizens and journalists will inevitably lose interest in the rump left behind (Benz & Stutzer 2002). Ultimately there is a complex interdependence built into the system. As one part pulls, another pushes. Unpicking this knot is a key challenge for the future of democracy.

6) What are the consequences?

This section establishes a framework for analysing the impact of digital technologies on the news media. It first sets out the three key digital leisure trends. It then establishes the four key elements in the process of news where digital technologies will have had an impact. Finally it sets out four specific changes associated with digital news.

The impact of the move from analogue to digital news should be considered in light of the three key trends associated with the transition from the analogue to the digital leisure society: personalisation; portability; and storage:

1. Personalisation

Leisure activities and products are increasingly tailored to individuals' personal interests. At the same time you are increasingly able to undertake leisure activities alone or with people you have never met.

2. Portability

Digital technologies are associated with increasing mobility as a result of miniaturisation and increased power of batteries and radio transmitters. Individuals can travel further and carry more.

3. Storage

While Moore's law still holds the dramatic change in digital media over the last ten years has been the increase in storage capacity. From VHS to DVD, from CD to the iPod.

Understanding the potential impact of digital technologies on news calls upon us to examine the four aspects of the production process. See figure 8 below for outline. These are:

Inputs – how digital technologies have expanded or contracted the information available to news producers. This may include, mobile phones, satellite links, faster editing suites. For example, journalists are able to be embedded with troops in Iraq and send back real-time pictures direct to viewers screens. However, Andrew Marr worries that there has been a “growth [in] an office-based editorial culture, rather than a reporters' journalism.... The trouble is office-bound journalists from modern newspapers become dependent on fixers: the PR men manipulating celebrity careers; the media-trained university experts; the polling companies with a story to sell” (Marr 2004: 115).

Content – how digital technologies have impacted on the product, i.e. news. Has what is considered to be news changed? Has increasing competition for eye-balls meant a greater pressure to innovate? For example, the rapid dissemination of sports supplements in Monday editions of the national newspapers at no extra cost to the

reader. Has what is considered to be newsworthy changed over time? Digital technologies may have increased the scope of what can be shown on screen. For example, the ready availability of dramatic pictures of crime through CCTV footage may encourage television producers to devote more time to crime stories.

Transmission – the transition from analogue to digital has enabled new ways to disseminate the news, for example 24-hour news channels and the internet. New information sources displace the old, for example the decline of old sources such as Saturday afternoon football editions of local newspapers and the rise and rise of Jeff Stelling on Sky Sports.

Reception – The impact of the changes above on how citizens access and interact with The News. For example, the impact of the ability to choose news when you want on audiences for the traditional half hour television news bulletin. There is also the bottom up impact of wider social change, for example an ageing society, on the above.

We can identify four mega trends arising from the increased pervasiveness of digital technologies in the news from the analysis above. These developments are a result of the use of technology but are not determined by technology. They are also value neutral, that is to say, neither a good nor a bad thing.

1. *Speed*

While the technical speed of transmission of information has not significantly increased (see thickness below) the speed at which the news reaches the audience has. Increasing competition (see choice below) and new delivery platforms have increased the urgency under which journalists and news organisations operate.

2. *Thickness*

The footprint covering the area in which information can be collected, collated, transmitted and read and listened to has increased. The area the news covers has been stretched across time and space. Journalists can report from further, faster, in greater depth. There is more news available to more people than ever before. Readers, listeners and viewers live in, what Hargreaves and Thomas memorably described as, a 'news cloud' (Hargreaves & Thomas 2002). News is more easily available than ever before, in fact, in many cases you would need actively to avoid it.

3. *Consumer Choice*

Consumer choice has expanded in two ways. There is a greater choice of news sources available to citizens than ever before. Individuals have far more choice as to when and where to access the news, if at all.

4. *Citizen Voice*

During the twentieth century news became at first concentrated in the hands of the few and not the many as the barriers to entry of first print, then radio and finally television prevented the majority from producing the news (as opposed to being actors in the news). Citizens' voices are increasingly being heard in the news. New technology and the declining value of radio spectrum combined to open up the airwaves beyond the long-standing "radio hams". Community radio and in some cases television continued, however, to lag behind democratic radio *par excellence* - pirate radio.

New production techniques, such as the radio phone-in and phone, SMS and email polls, talk television, have increased audience control and interaction in the old media (Coleman 1997). News programmes are using more immediate audience polls (“push the red button now”). Politicians prefer to be questioned, and be seen to be questioned, by real people rather than professional journalists. The internet, and in particular blogging software, opened up production of the news to far more than in recent years though technological literacy and the cost of ownership of Personal Computers prevented this tool from being in the hands of the many.

7) Four macro-challenges for the future

The removal of prior bottlenecks in the production, transmission and reception of news has resulted in three macro-challenges for the future. Policymakers, regulators, news professionals and the public should be concerned about four key issues: how much information is enough to make an enlightened decision?; what have been the positive and negative impacts of competition?; does the democratisation of news production mean the need to re-think old codes around the rights and responsibilities of the journalist?

1. Local, national, global public spheres: How much information is enough?

For citizens to be able to take informed decisions, information needs to be available. But just making information available is not enough. Ideally there should be a plurality of information sources and public discussion and debate of the issues. Traditionally the news media has fulfilled this role at a local and national level.

However, as the traditional news media increasingly withdraw from localities, government is devolving political decision-making power down to individual citizens. Both major political parties in the UK support variations of increased citizen choice in public services at a local level: which school, what surgeon; which residential home? There is the clear potential for severe information asymmetries.

While regulators are able to provide information, for example league tables, this is not the same as a public sphere of discussion and debate. New delivery platforms, from community radio to the internet, could facilitate local public discussion and there is some evidence that this can work (Coleman 2005; Davies 2004). The question remains, how much information is enough and at what level should/could it be provided and who will provide it? Would a single state funded news provider be sufficient?

2. Plurality & competition: How much competition is enough?

The quote at the top of this paper from the Chairman of the BBC Michael Grade makes clear the possible link between increasing competition in supply and the potential for decreasing quality in news. This paper has already argued that the relationship, if there is one at all, is likely to be more complex than Michael Grade acknowledges. However it is possible that increasing competition which is as a rule of thumb is good for consumers may be bad for citizens.

Ofcom’s Public Service Television Broadcasting review states that:

Plurality is at the heart of successful PSB provision. It involves the provision of complementary services to different audiences; it ensures a range of perspectives in news, current affairs and in other

types of programmes; and it provides competition to spur innovation and drive quality higher.
(Ofcom 2004a: 2.14)

The question is of course, how much of a “plurality” provides enough competition to spur innovation and drive quality? It is possible that the increase in the supply of news and therefore increasing competition may have resulted in an increase in quality in only some aspects of news. For example, it may be packaged better and provided faster. On the other hand, the need for speed may have reduced other aspects of quality; for example veracity.

We may also find, particularly in broadcast news, a trend towards market segmentation. This may be found in a move to appeal to certain demographic segments of the population. Arguably this trend is already self-evident in age, gender and socio-economic status. However, given that members of the public seem to select (under some circumstances) their news according to “political” preference under conditions of increasing competition news providers may try and exploit political bias in the search for audiences. Fox News has successfully grown its audience in the US attracting predominantly Republican voters. The available evidence suggests that this is a self-selecting audience; i.e. that Republicans choose Fox rather than Fox makes Republicans (DellaVigna & Kaplan 2005).^{ix} The concern is that while media bias may not change votes it can have a major impact on quality of government and issue salience (Kull *et al.* 2003).

It may be the case that there is an endemic market failure and that the market for news should always be a managed market like health or education. On the other hand, the increase in supply may iron out the potential for market failure, citizens are simply able to better assess the overall quality of different news sources and choose the best for themselves. The current evidence suggests that there is a complex interaction between the increase in competition and changes in output (Cook 2004). There is as yet little evidence of the impact of changes in output on society. Understanding this complex interaction is an essential challenge for the future.

3. Rights and responsibilities: Just who is a journalist?

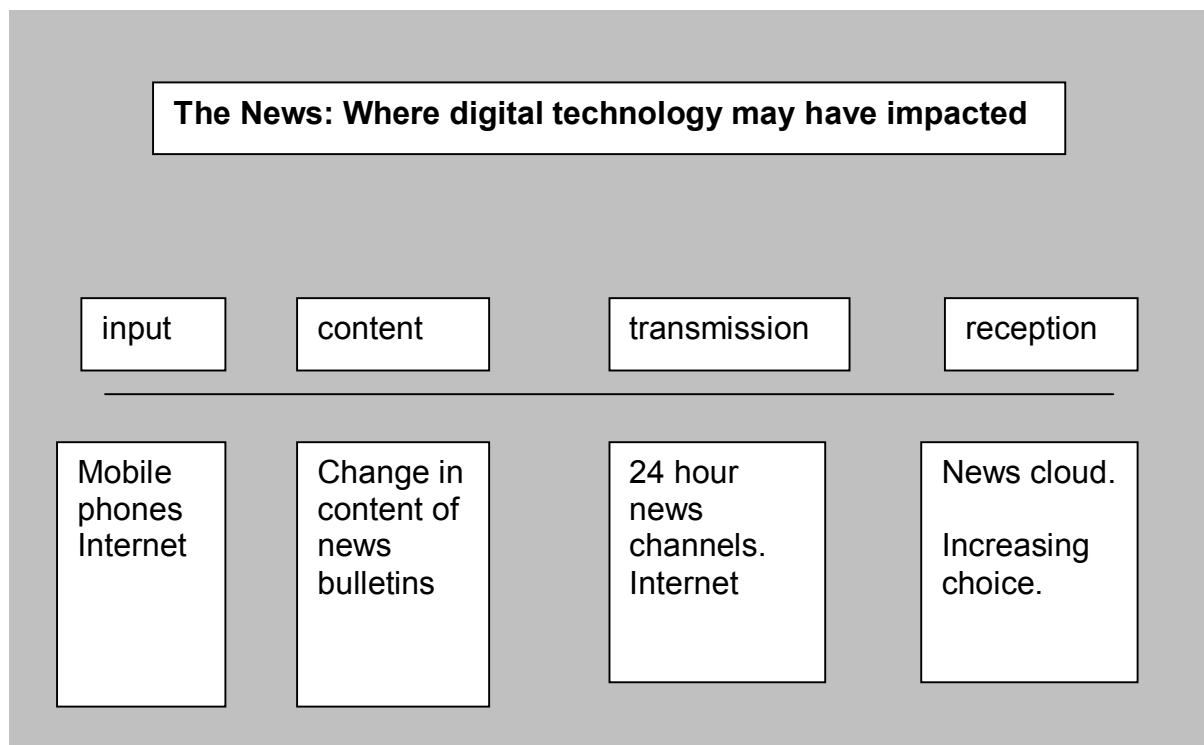
Journalists have certain rights and responsibilities above and beyond those of the general public. Journalists can defend themselves from libel using the defence of qualified privilege, they have rights of access and the responsibility to seek out and tell the truth (NUJ 1998). However, as more citizens begin to publish the established codes are being challenged. Citizens are being prosecuted and punished where a journalist, at least in a Western democracy, would not. For example, three blogs are being sued in the United States for not revealing their sources following the publications of sensitive information about forthcoming Apple products. Under Californian law journalists cannot be made to reveal their sources, as Martin Bashir recently demonstrated in the Michael Jackson trial. However, the judge in the trial found that the law did not apply to bloggers (BBC 2005). Bloggers are also pushing back the boundaries of access to the powerful. Garrett M. Graff, who writes the blog *Fishbowl D.C.*, was the first blogger to be accredited to the daily White House press briefing in March 2005 (CNN 2005).

Both actions are symptomatic of the need to update the codes of rights and responsibilities developed for the analogue world for the new democratised digital voices.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to survey current debates and controversy. The case the position paper makes is that rarely has the impact of the move to a Digital Britain been understood with any clarity in these current debates. The impact of the move from analogue to digital technology can be broadly understood as removing, or at least relaxing, some of the technological bottlenecks that made the news what we used to understand it. This forces us to confront choices that didn't previously exist. Given the importance of technology in the production, dissemination and reception of news (from *The Telegraph* to Sky News) we should hardly be surprised that the business model has been radically altered. However, because of the unique place that the news media holds in a democracy, the impact of technology hasn't been understood or discussed in the same way that "one click ordering" and "just in time delivery" has been on the retail sector.

There are three broad areas for ongoing expert discussion and input. How has the change in the market structure impacted on the size and health of the public sphere at the local, national and global basis? Second, what has been the impact of increasing competition on news professionals, news output and citizens? Third, how are the rights and responsibilities of journalists and citizens evolving in the digital age? The challenge is to get the detailed questions right to enable a better understanding of whether we've just rubbed the genie's lamp or opened Pandora's box.



Appendix 1: 'Never trust the teller. Trust the tale.' D.H. Lawrence

Many of the debates above revolve around trust. For some time academics have been concerned that the less attention you pay to the news media and by extension the less political knowledge you have the more trusting in both politicians and journalists you are (Bennett 1988). However, you are more likely to trust your MP if you have met them face-to-face and more likely to perceive improvement in public services if you have used them recently i.e. non-mediated communication improves perceptions of standards. The news media seems to play a role here.

Trust is particularly important issue for businesses that rely on trust, that is to say those that rely on reputation because a consumer cannot evaluate the goods and services prior to purchase. When exploring the rapid collapse of Enron one academic considered that:

'The companies that produced the goods Enron traded — steel, energy, oil — are generally *not* in the trust business, because the products they sell can be examined for quality, and buyers generally didn't rely on reputation in evaluating the products.

In contrast, because Enron bought and sold contracts for delivery of these products into the distant future, it was more like a bank or insurance company than a seller of physical products. Enron, indeed, was involved in both long-term financial services through its contracts, and in the creation of markets, and both of these require trustworthiness.' (McAfee 2004)

Companies that "sell" information rely on trust in their product more than most. O'Neill suggests that trust is related to an ability to assess the information given (O'Neill, 2002; MORI, 2003). For example, it is simple to assess the reliability of weather reports as we all know when last night's forecast was wrong. However, in the case of other subjects, for example political information, it is very difficult for any assessment of the reliability of the information to be made by the general public. However, once that assessment of unreliability has been made regaining public trust in the information provided, and thereby the reason to make the purchasing decision again, could be extremely difficult.

Trusting someone to tell the truth may well be related, sensibly, to how likely you think they are to be partial. So TV news readers, governed by rules of due impartiality, score highly on public trust, whilst "red-top hacks" and Ministers do very badly. Both act in a highly visibly partial manner on a daily basis.

This may be why that trust in your local MP increases after you've met them. Partly a reflection on face-to-face contact, we generally trust people more who we know better, but partly because local MPs are not called upon to take party political decisions very often when dealing with constituents personal concerns.

So the media literate public trusts both journalists and politicians less precisely because they pay more attention to the news. Naturally, those that read red-tops on a daily basis tend to be less trusting because they trust their source of media less.

A question for further research would be to ask if members of the public trusted Doctors less when they are campaigning for a pay rise at a national level than when they go to the surgery. Current survey data doesn't allow for this.

About the Author

Jamie Cowling is Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research Digital, Media & Arts programmes and has worked for the Strategy Division of the Department for Culture, Media & Sport. He published *For Arts Sake?: Society and the Arts in the Twenty-First Century* in 2004, *New News: Impartial Broadcasting in the Digital Age* with Damian Tambini in 2002, *A Progressive Licence Fee* with Kim Allen and Emily Keaney in 2003 and *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Communications*, also with Damian Tambini, in 2004.

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Endnotes

ⁱ See *Do They Mean Us?* in *MediaGuardian* 2005 for more examples.

ⁱⁱ That is to say one not based on the transmission mechanism – print, television, radio, net etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ Regular attention is important. We know that when “major” events happen news audiences rise. E.G. Attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September 2001 (see Tambini & Cowling 2002).

^{iv} Note the World Bank’s use of ‘political markets’.

^v I have not been able to find any data either by income decile or Socio-Economic Status on use of news websites.

^{vi} Here we disagree with Norris who suggests that this should reside between the market and citizens. However we argue, following Habermas, that this should be between the market and the state.

^{vii} *The Telegraph* was so named, to stress its innovative means of transmission.

^{viii} For the print sector the move of classified advertising from local newspapers to the internet. For broadcast the macro impact of greater competition making traditional cross-subsidy on commercial public service broadcasters (ITV) unviable see Ofcom 2005.

^{ix} Media bias tends to be reinforcing. Fox News viewers already voted Republican but heavy viewing of Fox made them more committed Republicans e.g. they raised their campaign contributions to the Republican Party. See DellaVigna & Kaplan 2005 for further details.