

Chapter 12

The Changing News Media Environment

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Since the mid-2000s Britain's political communication environment has undergone rapid change. During the 2010 election campaign, television continued its dominance as the most important medium through which the British public acquires its political information, as Britain's first ever live televised party leaders' debates received saturation coverage for almost the entire campaign. But over the previous half-decade the growing mainstream popularity of the internet has started to undermine some broadcast-era assumptions regarding strategic news management, both in government, and on the campaign trail. This new, hybrid, environment, one characterised by a complex intermingling of the 'old', the 'new' and the 'renewed' creates particular uncertainty for 'old' news media, established politicians and political parties. The old media environment, dominated by media and political elites working in traditional television, radio and newspapers, remains significant for British politics, but politics is increasingly mediated online. The internet is creating a more open, fluid political opportunity structure – one that increasingly enables the British public to exert its influence and hold politicians and media to account. The origins of this current hybridity can be traced back over the last couple of decades, but since the mid-2000s, the pace of change has quickened. The stage on which the drama of British politics unfolds is in the process of being redesigned, partly by political and media elites, and partly by ordinary citizens.

Old, new and renewed media

Britain's political communication environment is now a hybrid, contradictory, mixture of old, new and what Hoskins and O'Loughlin term 'renewed' media (2007: 17). Old media, primarily television, radio and newspapers are still, given the size of their audiences and their centrality to the life of the nation, rightly referred to as 'mainstream', but the very

nature of the mainstream is changing. While old media organisations are adapting, evolving and renewing their channels of delivery, working practices and audiences, genuinely new media outlets, driven primarily by the spread of the internet, are achieving popularity and becoming part of a new mainstream. Politicians, journalists and the British public are simultaneously creating and adapting to these complexities.

Despite declining audience share, traditional media organisations continue to play a pivotal role in British politics, as we saw, for example with the *Daily Telegraph's* initiation of the MPs' expenses scandal during 2009. The media professionals at the heart of these organisations remain deeply embedded in the routines and insider networks of Westminster, Whitehall and the major metropolitan centres. They interact with politicians and senior civil servants on a daily basis. Politicians still stage their interventions to coincide with the rhythms of the newsrooms, which remain the main route to a large audience and maximum publicity, as Labour's minister for work and pensions, James Purnell, revealed when he resigned from the cabinet on the day of the European Parliament elections in June 2009. Purnell sent his resignation email to two national newspapers several hours before he called the prime minister, realising that this would have the biggest impact on the evening television news bulletins when it was published once the polls closed (Stratton and Wintour 2009).

Outside what is traditionally understood as the mainstream, genuinely new media players such as political bloggers make frequent interventions in the political arena (Dale 2008). They sometimes shape the political agenda through their commentary and, less frequently, their investigative 'scoops', but are still more often parasitical upon old media for their content. Even when a leading blog lands an exclusive it is dependent upon traditional news organisations for taking these stories to a truly mass audience. This dependency is mutual: news organisations increasingly capitalise on new media as a resource, tapping into the viral circulation of online content and weaving it into their news genres and production techniques. The new media outlets are in the process of being integrated into the mainstream digital political news system in a journey that is likely to continue for many years. In this hybridised system, the old media organisations are currently still king: they have the collective financial and organisational resources to 'outscoop' exclusively new media upstarts, and to leapfrog new media outlets with the launch of expensive new initiatives, such as online television delivery and ever more elaborate web environments, which combine editorial authority with popular participation.

An excellent example of how politics now plays out in this hybrid digital media environment is the furore over MPs' expenses in 2009 –

arguably parliament's most serious crisis since the emergence of British democracy. The huge quantities of data on expenses were leaked from parliament in digitised form on optical discs. The *Daily Telegraph* bought the discs and ran an extended series of revelations, both online and offline, spanning almost three weeks in May 2009. *Telegraph* researchers sifted through the data, extracting the most damaging items. Each day's new releases were carefully staged to cause the maximum impact on other media. Frequent television appearances by the paper's deputy editor, Benedict Brogan, were a key part of this. Broadcast news and political blogs engaged in a sustained feeding frenzy, as, day after day, MPs' expenses were the top story across all news outlets. This was an example of 'old-fashioned' investigative journalism, but with a difference: the hybrid media environment accelerated and amplified events and distributed the information across all platforms. As the *Telegraph* released information online and in printed form, other news organisations picked up the new revelations and ran their own stories. In a final twist, some weeks later, when parliament officially released the data, which ran to more than 458,000 pages, the *Guardian* published the entire database on its website and invited ordinary readers to identify, log and discuss claims. By July 2009, its readers had reviewed 201,000 pages (*Guardian* 2009). This reveals the growing importance of the internet, not just as a channel for the communication of information, but also as a mechanism of organisation and collective action in the creation of news.

New media use in Britain

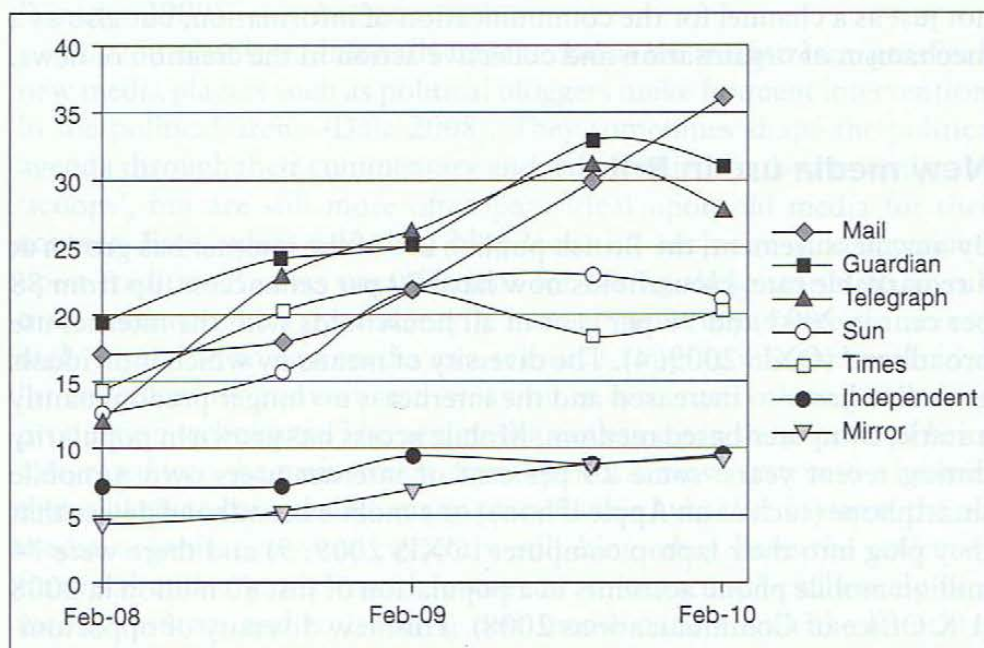
By any measurement, the British public's use of the internet has grown at a remarkable rate. Households now have 70 per cent access, up from 58 per cent in 2003 and 96 per cent of all households with the internet use broadband (OXIS 2009: 4). The diversity of means by which individuals go online has also increased and the internet is no longer predominantly a static, computer-based medium. Mobile access has grown in popularity during recent years: some 20 per cent of internet users own a mobile smartphone (such as an Apple iPhone) or a mobile broadband device that they plug into their laptop computer (OXIS 2009: 9) and there were 74 million mobile phone accounts in a population of just 60 million in 2008 (UK Office of Communications 2008). This new diversity of opportunities for internet access also plays an important role in creating multitasking lifestyles in multi-connection households. Around a quarter of those with digital or cable television use it to access the internet, while 32 per cent use a mobile device while in the home – a figure that has trebled since 2005, reflecting the popularity of wireless handheld devices with built-in

web browsers, email and messaging software. Seventy-one per cent of internet users now report 'doing more than one activity while online, such as listening to music, watching TV, or using the telephone' (OXIS 2009: 12, 36).

The changing face of news consumption

News consumption habits among the British electorate are shifting. In 2007 the number of internet users who reported that they read a 'newspaper or news service' online stood at 30 per cent. In the space of just two years, this number almost doubled, to reach 58 per cent (*ibid.*: 32). More generally, 75 per cent of internet users now report reading news online, including non-newspaper sources such as blogs (*ibid.*: 20). However, can we detect any audience preferences? Do internet users go to 'alternative' sources of news? The evidence suggests that the majority of those online tend to access the websites of the main news outlets, either directly or via news aggregators, such as Yahoo, AOL and Google (Stanyer 2008).

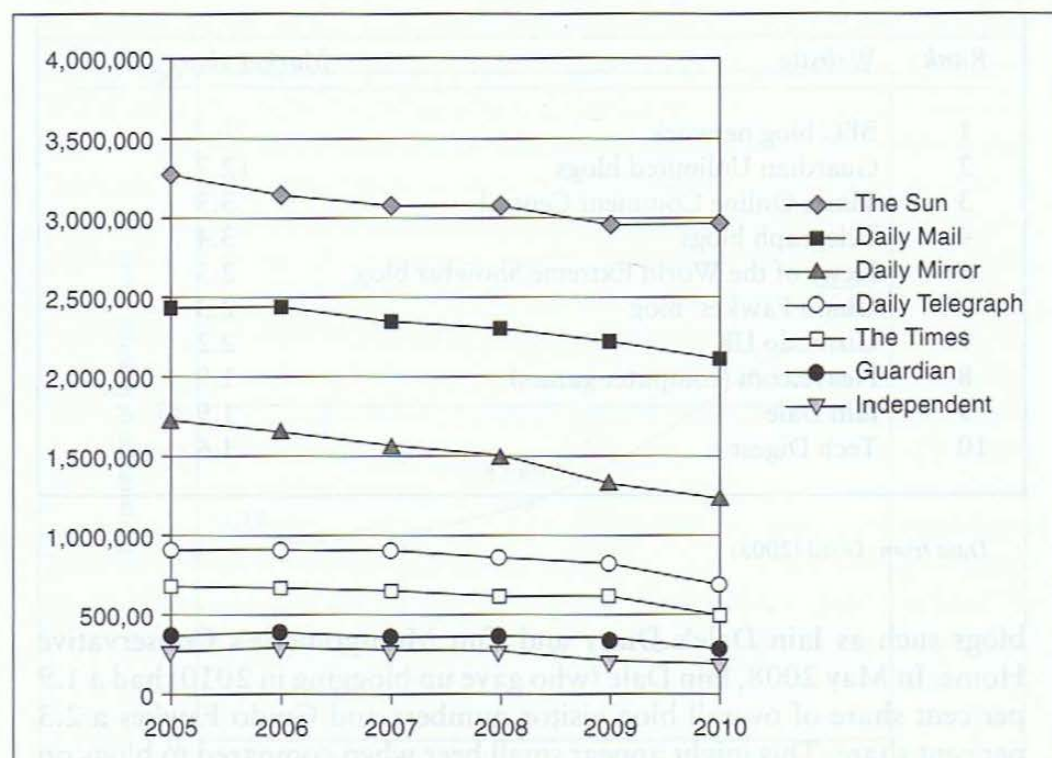
Figure 12.1 *Monthly unique readers of national newspaper websites, 2008–10 (millions)*



Note: data points are February and September of each year. *Independent* did not make ABCe figures public until May 2008; the February 2008 figure is therefore taken from May 2008. *Mirror* not part of ABCe until March 2008; the February 2008 figure is therefore taken from March 2008.

Data from: ABCe; Kiss (2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010); Luft (2008)

Figure 12.2 National newspaper print edition circulations, 2005–10



Note: includes bulk sales.

Data from: *Guardian* 2010, which uses data from ABC

Most strikingly, the growth in online news consumption contrasts starkly with the decline in print edition circulations of the same outlets. While it is difficult to determine precise levels of traffic, and it is clear that overseas readers are a huge presence in these data, figures provided by *ABCe* reveal overall growth in visitor numbers and show in 2010 that main newspaper organisations are a hugely important presence for news online see Figure 12.1).

Between 1987 and 2007 copies of national newspapers sold per year declined by about a third and between 1998 and 2007 sales fell for all the nationals, apart from the *Daily Star* and the *Daily Mail* (UK Office of Fair Trading 2008). The pace of change has accelerated since 2008 (see Figure 12.2).

While newspaper brands are big hitters online, alternative online news sites can still secure significant audiences. Some high-profile blogs attract a relatively large readership. For example, Paul Staines' Guido Fawkes blog attracted nearly 350,000 unique visitors in April 2009 and regularly averages 100,000 daily page views. Also popular are Conservative-supporting

Table 12.1 *Top ten British blogs by internet visits for May 2008*

Rank	Website	Market share (%)
1	BBC blog network	20.2
2	Guardian Unlimited blogs	12.7
3	Times Online Comment Central	3.5
4	Telegraph blogs	3.4
5	News of the World Extreme Showbiz blog	2.5
6	Guido Fawkes' blog	2.3
7	Gizmodo UK	2.2
8	Neave.com (computer games)	1.9
9	Iain Dale	1.9
10	Tech Digest	1.6

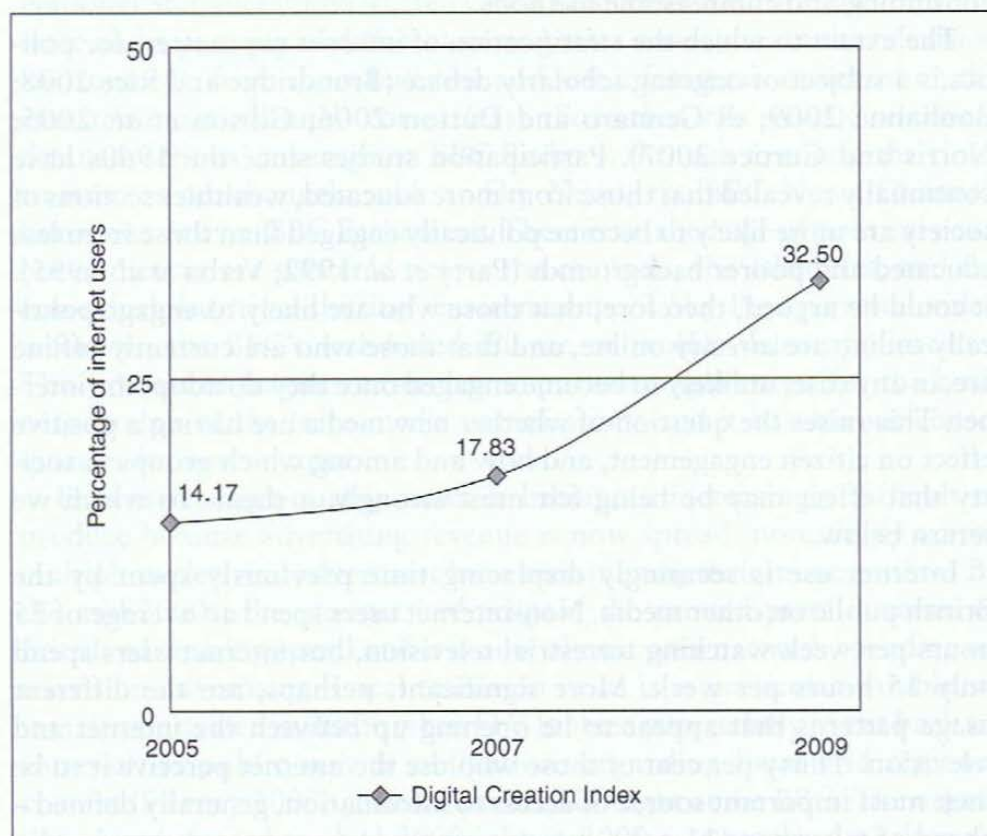
Data from: Goad (2008)

blogs such as Iain Dale's Diary and Tim Montgomerie's Conservative Home. In May 2008, Iain Dale (who gave up blogging in 2010) had a 1.9 per cent share of overall blog visitor numbers and Guido Fawkes a 2.3 per cent share. This might appear small beer when compared to blogs on the BBC and the *Guardian*, which had a combined 33 per cent share of blog traffic over the same period (see Table 12.1), but things are not as straightforward as they might seem. If we set aside the BBC and *Guardian* blogs, the presence of alternative online news looks remarkably competitive. Guido Fawkes is not too far behind the mainstream newspaper blogs of the *Times* and the *Telegraph*.

From consumers to producers?

Perhaps the most startling shift since the mid-2000s comes in the form of mass participation in the creation of online content. This has been fuelled by the growth of web 2.0 services such as blogs, online social network sites, such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, collaborative production sites such as Wikipedia, and news aggregators and discussion sites such as Digg, Yahoo Buzz and the BBC's Have Your Say sections (Chadwick 2009). Some 49 per cent of British internet users maintain a profile on an online social network site; 22 per cent update a blog; and 27 per cent participate in online chat rooms. Older online communication forms such as instant messaging (64 per cent of users) and email (97 per cent) are now ubiquitous in British society (OXIS 2009: and see Figure 12.3).

Figure 12.3 *Growth of online user-generated content in Britain, 2005–9*



Note: the Digital Creation Index is a composite mean value generated by the authors from measures in OXIS (2009: 28). Questions were 'How often do you use the internet for the following purposes?; Update or create a profile on a social networking site; Post pictures or photos on the internet; Post messages on discussion or message boards; Use a distribution list for email; Write a weblog; Maintain a personal website' (2005: N=1,309; 2007: N=1,578; 2009: N=1,401)

Data from: authors' analysis and adaptation of data from OXIS (2009)

One nation, digitally divided

These trends are impressive, but equally important is the persistence of Britain's digital divide. Thirty per cent of the population are still without internet access in the home. In Britain the strongest predictors of not using the internet have remained constant: age, educational attainment, and socio-economic status (Chadwick 2006: 49–80; UK Office of Communications 2009: 3). Thus, while the internet has achieved mainstream popularity and is now an important source of political information for the British public, there is still a significant proportion for whom it is largely irrelevant. These individuals principally rely on broadcast

media for their political information, and if they do participate in politics, they are compelled to do so through what can often be more time-consuming and cumbersome methods.

The extent to which the stratification of internet use matters for politics is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate (Brundridge and Rice 2008; Boulianne 2009; di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Gibson *et al.* 2005; Norris and Curtice 2007). Participation studies since the 1960s have continually revealed that those from more educated, wealthier sections of society are more likely to become politically engaged than those from less educated and poorer backgrounds (Parry *et al.* 1992; Verba *et al.* 1995). It could be argued, therefore, that those who are likely to engage politically online are *already* online, and that those who are currently offline are, in any case, unlikely to become engaged once they do adopt the internet. This raises the question of whether new media are having a positive effect on citizen engagement, and how and among which groups in society that effect may be being felt most strongly, a theme to which we return below.

Internet use is seemingly displacing time previously spent by the British public on other media. Non-internet users spend an average of 25 hours per week watching terrestrial television, but internet users spend only 15 hours per week. More significant, perhaps, are the different usage patterns that appear to be opening up between the internet and television. Thirty per cent of those who use the internet perceive it to be their most important source of access to information, generally defined – ahead of television (11 per cent), newspapers (seven per cent) and radio (six per cent). At the same time, non-internet users naturally report that terrestrial television is their main media source of entertainment, but also report that television is much more *important* to them for entertainment content (OXIS 2009: 33). This may have implications for the future communication of politics. There may be a growing divide between those who use the internet for their ‘hard’ news and information (including, of course, political news) and those without the internet, whose media diets consist mostly of entertainment that they deem more important than informational content.

Old news and the new media environment: quality under pressure?

The rapidly changing media environment has generated difficulties for traditional news media organisations and this may well have consequences for the quality of political information available to the British public. Multi-channel digital television now reaches 80 per cent of British

households and in several areas of the country, such as Scotland and the north west of England, penetration rates are much higher (UK Office for National Statistics 2009: 4). Television news channels continue to proliferate and a panoply of different news genres now exists in the television environment, from short bulletins and soft infotainment content on the entertainment channels (or at least those that run news), relatively detailed 'serious' coverage on BBC Radio 4, through to round-the-clock treatments on channels such as Sky News, the BBC News Channel, Euronews or even BBC Parliament. There is no shortage of political news but audiences are scattered across the channels, the schedules, and the non-scheduled 'time-shifting' environments of Sky Plus personal video recorders, the BBC's web-based iPlayer, or mobile video applications. This process of fragmentation has important implications for the business models of the large media organisations and it has serious consequences for news output.

Expensive, high-quality news is becoming increasingly difficult to produce because advertising revenue is now spread more thinly across multiple outlets and advertisers have been moving their money online. By the mid-2000s, the internet had eclipsed the printed press in terms of British advertising spend and it is now almost on a par with spending on television advertising. Local television news is in particular trouble, as was demonstrated in 2009, when ITV lobbied successfully to cut back on some of its public service obligations regarding local and regional content (Sweeney 2008). Conditions are also tight at the BBC. The organisation was forced to shed 3000 jobs in 2008 as a result of a relatively stringent licence fee deal and it is fighting a proposed top-slicing of the licence fee to subsidise ITV local news. In early 2011, the BBC announced plans to radically reduce the number of pages on its websites.

Revenue earners such as premium-rate phone-ins have been adversely affected by a number of 'fakery' scandals in which shows were found to have been fabricating competition results (for example, ITV's *Richard and Judy* and the BBC's *Blue Peter*, among others). There have also been general concerns over the less regulated areas of satellite and cable TV, such as the numerous quiz channels that occupy the obscurer reaches of the channel listings. According to the OXIS survey of 2007, levels of trust in the internet as a source of information are now higher than they are for both television and the printed press.

Wither the British press?

Television viewing and radio listening both declined from the early to the mid-2000s (UK Office of Communications 2007), but nowhere have the pressures of Britain's changing media environment been felt more

strongly than in its newspaper industry. The British press are in the middle of a painful transition towards new business models. Readership of print editions across all newspaper sectors has been in decline for several decades due to competition from television and now the internet. The period since 2008 has seen a precipitous decline in the circulation of newsprint. While Britain awaits the first major casualty of this new environment, the signs are that it may not be too far away. In 2010, Alexander Lebedev, the billionaire former Russian KGB spy, bought the struggling *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* for a nominal sum of £1 and a follow-on deal worth just £9.25 million to the paper's Irish parent company, INM (BBC News Online 2010b).

The press's initial reaction to the internet in the 1990s was to ignore it in the hope that it might prove to be a fad. This was followed by a strategy of placing the content of the printed version of a paper onto a website in the hope of attracting sufficient 'eyeballs' to generate advertising revenue. Some papers, such as the *Financial Times*, experimented early on with subscription based models, only to scale back due to a lack of subscribers and the lure of the advertising model during the economic boom of the 2000s, before once again attempting to make the pay-per-view model work in the late 2000s. Many local and regional papers either lacked the resources to develop their own websites or stayed out of the game entirely for fear that they would cannibalise their print offerings. The annual circulation of local and regional newspapers fell by almost 40 per cent between 1989 and 2009 (UK Office of Fair Trading 2009:, 12). It seems clear that the pay-per-view model can be made to work online where an outlet has a distinctive niche, as is the case with the *FT*. It remains to be seen whether more general news outlets can also make it work. In June 2010, two of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation online news sites, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times* were placed behind a 'paywall'. At the time of writing, none of the other national newspapers have chosen to follow suit. Even the *Daily Mail*, whose online offerings have soared in popularity over the last few years, remains wedded to the advertising-and-eyeballs model – for now (DMGT 2010).

In common with the situation in other countries, particularly the United States, the British printed press are currently caught in a trap. Declining paper circulations, increasing online readerships, competition from free online news providers and blogs, shrinking and more thinly spread advertising revenues, and the economic recession of the late 2000s, have all taken their toll. Advertising and search company Google now dominates the online advertising market, but online revenues per reader are substantially smaller than the revenues per reader for traditional classified advertising, and ceding in-house control over advertising

mechanisms to an external company with a quasi-monopoly is unattractive for newspaper proprietors. At the regional and local levels, where 80 per cent of papers' income comes from advertising, the press have long relied upon classified small ads to sustain themselves, but revenues from these have almost halved since the late-1990s, due to competition from online outlets such as eBay and Craigslist (UK Office of Fair Trading 2009: 10).

The main news organisations have responded to this changing environment by finding new ways to appeal to audience loyalty. A key development is online social interaction. During the last half decade, interactive commenting spaces have flourished online. Space for reader participation is now much less tightly restricted and audience messages are much less dependent on the decisions of editorial gatekeepers. All of the major British news sites now have well established interactive features, such as op-ed columns with comments, message boards, chat rooms and email, and receive hundreds of thousands of comments per month. Readers are encouraged, sometimes paid, to submit material to news sites. National news organisations are also attempting to position themselves as online social networking hubs, where, in addition to reporting and debating political developments, readers post pictures, socialise, choose a date and create their own material. The websites of the *Daily Express*, the *Star* and the *Daily Telegraph* now allow their readers to set up their own blogs. The *Daily Telegraph's* 'My Telegraph' had an estimated 20,000 registered users in 2008 (Dodson 2008) – a reasonable success, though some way short of the 26 million UK users of Facebook (CheckFacebook 2010).

While the adaptation of news organisations to the digital media environment is creating new opportunities for citizens to engage in political debate and express their opinions, it has inevitably led to cost cutting. Timely, relevant and challenging political journalism is an expensive business, especially if it involves an investigative element. However, the revenues to support this kind of activity have been falling for several years. Almost all commercial news organisations have seen deep cuts and radical restructuring of staff and budgets (Davies 2008). Writers and editors, in what were once powerhouses of in-depth reporting and commentary (such as the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times*), now sit side by side with upstart individual or group blogs, most of which have a keen awareness of niche interests and very short news cycles. Top political bloggers regularly produce articles indistinguishable from those published in the op-ed sections of newspapers. With low overheads, large readerships and, in some cases, self-sustaining advertising revenues they are free from the bureaucracy of the professional newsroom (see Dale 2008). Some bloggers are also able to conduct background investigations. An example was

Paul Staines' long-running series of exposés about Peter Hain during 2007, culminating in damaging revelations about the origins of donations to Hain's campaign fund for the deputy leadership of the Labour party. These were partly instrumental in the Hain's decision to resign his ministerial post in January 2008 (even if he was to return to cabinet in 2009). This was widely reported as the British blogosphere's first political 'scalp'. Despite such developments, one of the key criticisms of bloggers is that they are 'amateurs' who lack the professional training of journalists (Keen 2007). They have also been accused of being less discerning in what they publish, and as likely to disseminate unsubstantiated political gossip as much as genuine political news.

Yet it now seems clear that television's monopoly on 'breaking news' is loosening, not only because online news sites are more prepared to take risks by publishing stories without the standards of verification usually required of professional journalists, but also because the viral nature of online communication makes it much more likely that news will spread across interpersonal networks often before official press releases. Some big political news stories now break first online and are picked up by television and print journalists who obsessively follow their email, Twitter and blog feeds in the hunt for new leads. At the same time, however, some television and newspaper journalists, for example, the BBC's political and business editors, Nick Robinson and Robert Peston, now often release their own 'scoops' online, well before they officially file their stories or record a broadcast package for the evening news. The large, dedicated news organisations, particularly the BBC, but also Sky News, share vast amounts of content internally across their web and television divisions. This provides them with an ongoing structural advantage when it comes to breaking news.

While the British press and commercial broadcasters are certainly under pressure, the BBC is in a stronger position, largely as a result of the licence fee. Despite complaints of unfair competition, the BBC continues to build a sophisticated web presence which regularly gains 18 to 19 million monthly unique visitors. It has adopted many of the features used by other news organisations, such as columns with comments, message boards, chat rooms and email, and it also seeks to integrate citizen produced video into its news narratives, especially during exceptional events, such as the London tube bombings of 2005 or the G20 protests during 2009. In an era of cost cutting and downsizing in commercial media, the BBC may well come to play an even more important role as a source of news.

Transforming media management

A top-down model of political communication has tended to predominate in the UK. Indeed, the communication operation of the Blair government could be seen as the apotheosis of such an approach, with its aggressive strategy to market government and its policies in the best possible light (Stanyer 2007). This model has been gradually undermined by a series of spin scandals, by a press disenchanted with it as a method of media control, and by an audience increasingly fragmented and distrustful of government and its messages. During the closing stages of the Blair premiership in 2007, the then prime minister sought to distance himself from accusations of spin and 'control freakery' and attempted to lay the blame on the news media's neglect of policy and its obsession with political gossip and 'feral' personal attacks (Blair 2007).

When he took over as prime minister, Gordon Brown, in an attempt to reconnect with voters, sought to capitalise on early momentum by seeking to establish what was heralded as a new communication strategy based upon the factual presentation of policy. Periodic attempts to publicly demonstrate that government communication had moved away from the era of spin were a key feature of the Brown premiership, as a series of high-profile new appointments were presented to a largely sceptical audience of journalists and citizens. This metacommunication concerning how Downing Street went about repackaging its media operation was combined with what appear to have been genuine attempts to harness the power of new media, largely in response to David Cameron's and the Conservatives' growing success in experimenting with online video and social networking. But the merciless way in which the news media, old and new, exposed what it saw as Gordon Brown's character flaws and the behind-the-scenes realities of the Number 10 media operation were constant themes.

The end of spin, or just more?

One of Brown's first acts on taking office was his announcement of a shake-up of government media operations (Oborne 2007). Under Blair, Downing Street news management was a long-running story, despite Blair's belated attempts to alter matters, and by the time Brown took office, government communications were seen as untrustworthy by press and public alike (Phillis 2004). Perhaps the most significant act in Brown's revamp concerned the Downing Street media operation itself. Overall control was placed in the hands of a civil servant, Michael Ellam, and not a political appointee, as Blair's spokespersons, Alastair Campbell and David Hill, had been (UK House of Lords Committee on

Communication 2009). Ellam's appointment performed an important symbolic function. With him at the helm, Downing Street could claim to have moved away from the worst excesses of the Blair years. However, the reality of Brown's media operation turned out to be rather different. During the spring of 2009, the leaking of an email exchange between Gordon Brown's staffer, Damian McBride, and former Labour insider turned Labour blogger, Derek Draper, shed an unflattering light on Downing Street's approach. In addition to the front-of-house widely publicised media management activities, there was a below stairs shadow operation, run by McBride. If the former was aimed at addressing the image of government communications, the latter was focused on ruthlessly attacking opponents in and outside government.

'Smeargate', as it became known, revealed a plan by McBride to establish an ostensibly independent website called Red Rag, which would contain personalised attacks on leading Conservatives and their families. The fallout from this revelation and the earlier 'Statsgate', when Number 10 and Home Office claims about falling knife crime were condemned by the UK Statistics Authority as misleading, merely served to reinforce the image of government communications as a continuation of the worst excesses of the Campbell years. In the aftermath of the McBride email scandal an ICM poll for the *Guardian* found that only 13 per cent of those surveyed said Brown had succeeded in restoring trust in government; 82 per cent thought that he had failed (Glover 2009). A poll for the *Sunday Telegraph* found that a majority of the public thought the Brown government 'more likely to resort to spin and dirty tricks than Blair's' (Hennessy 2009).

The Draper-McBride affair is another example of the interaction of old, new and renewed media. It was first reported by a right-wing blogger, Paul Staines, whose website, Guido Fawkes, by being predicated on innuendo, gossip and rumour, emulates tabloid journalism. Staines' 'scoop' led to his being fêted as a beacon of truth by more mainstream Conservative bloggers. Draper and McBride's misguided attempt to emulate the success of Staines' approach by seeking to establish the Red Rag gossip site refracted new media through the lens of 1990s-style sleaze attacks and spin. Both individuals, however, entirely neglected the broader point about right of centre blogs such as Conservative Home's success in engaging and mobilising the Tory grassroots. Finally, it is important to stress that Staines did not publish the contents of the emails on his blog, but instead handed them to journalists in national newspapers: it was the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times* which publicly broke the stories, not the Guido Fawkes blog.

The Conservatives on the offensive: from communications to online social networks

David Cameron's election as Conservative leader in December 2005 heralded a new strategic approach to communication for the party. Though widely ridiculed by television and newspaper journalists when first launched in September 2006, the Webcameron website established Cameron's informal, conversational approach to media. It also signalled to a growing community of online Conservative activists that the new leader was attempting to move the party away from a membership model to a supporter network model. The Conservative blogging community continued to expand, and Conservative Home, founded in 2005, came to provide a space for party members to interact and is now an important venue enabling party members and the party elite to interact with one another.

Cameron's approach was not, however, solely focused on new media. On winning the leadership election, his team, headed by marketing professional, Steve Hilton, undertook a major public relations offensive, rebranding the Conservative party in order to demonstrate to the media that it had been transformed from an uncaring 'nasty party' as it was once described by former party chairman, Theresa May. The old party logo was ditched in favour of a green and blue oak tree to signify the party's new green credentials. The new policy agenda was promoted in a series of high-profile photo opportunities, including one which planted Cameron in the Arctic Circle to highlight the party's stand on global warming. The Cameron team also assiduously sought to promote the leader's personal characteristics to the British public. Talk shows have been a key plank in this strategy, as Table 12.2 reveals. While Cameron mostly featured on political talk shows, he also targeted popular entertainment formats, which reach far beyond the usual audiences for political programmes.

The press have been an important target for the Cameron team. In 2007, to boost existing media operations, Cameron employed former *News of the World* editor Andy Coulson. Coulson, once described as an 'old fashioned Fleet Street bully' (Oborne 2007), was hired for his popular news instincts and communication skills, as well as his contacts within the Murdoch empire. Stories of lavish Notting Hill dinner parties at which Cameron and Murdoch were guests hint at the Cameron team's attempts to gain the support of the Murdoch press (see Oborne 2007). The Cameron operation was helped by largely favourable coverage in the press, especially when compared with the treatment of previous Conservative leaders, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard.

Table 12.2 *Party leaders' appearances on television talk shows, 2007–10*

	<i>Show</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Appear- ances</i>	<i>Year</i>
David Cameron	Alan Titchmarsh Show	Entertainment	2	2009, 2010
	Parkinson	Entertainment	1	2007
	BBC Breakfast	Breakfast News	1	2008
	GMTV	Breakfast News	1	2009
	Various political talk shows	Political	10	2007–9
Gordon Brown	Piers Morgan's Life Stories	Entertainment	1	2010
	BBC Breakfast	Breakfast News	1	2008
	GMTV	Breakfast News	4	2008–9
	Various political talk shows	Political	8	2007–9

Data from: authors, compiled from Internet Movie Database and other sources

Cameron's assurance in both old and new media environments soon put Brown on the defensive. Number 10's response was to seek out new opportunities for promoting the prime minister's personal qualities. This partly involved the tried-and-tested chat-show 'sofa offensive' that had been perfected by Blair and, latterly, Cameron. Brown became a regular guest on GMTV, as well as on Andrew Marr's high-profile Sunday morning show, and he started to give longer, more personally revealing interviews to national newspapers and, in the run-up to the election, on television.

New media were also a key part of this personal rebranding. Internet marketing specialists were hired to upgrade the Number 10 website with a new range of web 2.0 features designed to allow visitors to keep in touch and interact with the prime minister and his senior staff. Visitors to the new site could now subscribe to Twitter and Flickr feeds, read a blog, watch short videos via YouTube, link to news stories through Delicious and Digg and to the Number 10 page on Facebook. Cameron and Brown regularly used YouTube to make announcements, including Brown's damaging unilateral proposal for the reform of MPs' expenses in 2009.

With politicians increasingly adopting digital communication initiatives, news management strategies at the very top of British politics are changing. The new approach would appear to involve the parties using

online social networking techniques that are increasingly used by many media organisations and private companies, and adapting a range of interactive features in the hope of attracting engaged followers.

Brown versus the press

Brown's premiership was marred by his toxic relationship with the traditional press. Relations between the news media and all governments undergo well documented changes, but Brown's honeymoon was particularly short. Press goodwill evaporated three months into his premiership after his U-turn on calling an early general election in the autumn of 2007. Despite a series of reshuffles and relaunches this hostility persisted through his tenure in office. Much of the anger with the administration was channelled through attacks on Brown's personal characteristics and leadership style. Such attacks often amplified the utterances of Brown's intra-party critics, so sometimes helping encourage others to join in the criticism. The press were quick to highlight the awkwardness of the prime minister's public performances and often sought to draw conclusions about his private behaviour. In June 2008, a leaked email conversation in which cabinet minister Peter Mandelson described Gordon Brown as failing to successfully mask his insecurities received widespread coverage. This angle reached a crescendo just weeks before the general election campaign, however, when the *Observer* journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, published *The End of the Party*, revealing what were painted as Brown's personal failings, including his alleged 'bullying' of Number 10 staff (Rawnsley 2010). Against this background it is easy to see why direct communication via the internet became more attractive to Number 10. However, while the broadcasters were initially willing to recycle Brown's YouTube announcements, his performances were widely derided as inauthentic and increasingly became the focus of negative coverage. His use of YouTube, in short, backfired: it became another reason for both the news media and party dissidents to express criticism.

The period of the Brown premiership was replete with new innovations, new appointments and relaunches. There were various attempts to repackage the prime minister and he was eager to be seen to be breaking with the past. But in the end, he often fell back on the 'old' tried-and-tested means of media manipulation and he was constantly fending off attacks from within his own party. Rumours of leadership challenges by members of the cabinet, particularly the foreign secretary, David Miliband, were never far from the front pages and this speculation was fuelled by a largely critical, often hostile press, creating vicious circles of negative coverage. Media operations under Brown were characterised by their own hybridity: the highly visible narrative for public consumption,

where Brown emerges as a quasi-populist, in-touch reformer, providing a fresh start, using the latest web 2.0 tools; and the hidden methods, in which spin doctors were used to launch personal attacks on opponents. It was the exposure of this latter practice during the 'Smeagate' affair that proved particularly damaging to Brown's reputation. This and its consequences for government credibility may prove to be the outgoing prime minister's long-term legacy for British political communication.

The Conservatives fared rather better in establishing a coherent media strategy, one based on a blend of tried-and-tested command-and-control methods, the targeting of mainstream journalists, televisual 'sofa offensives' but also well-integrated experiments with online engagement, such as Webcameron. The Conservatives were also much more successful in stimulating or simply aligning themselves with the growing number of grassroots activists engaged in mobilising for the party in online discussion forums and blogs. They also indirectly benefited from the damage inflicted by the influential right of centre Westminster gossip blogs (Iain Dale, Paul Staines), which professional journalists now monitor with religious dedication. After all, it was Labour's desperation at being outmanoeuvred in the blogosphere which led to the ill-fated email exchange between Number 10 and Derek Draper concerning the establishment of a left-wing version of Staines' site. Finally, it needs to be borne in mind that the Conservatives enjoyed a remarkably favourable press environment. This began with the selection of David Cameron as party leader but the watershed came in 2009 when, on the eve of the Labour party conference, the entire Murdoch press, including Britain's bestselling newspaper, the *Sun*, publicly ditched Labour and switched their support to the Conservatives. By the time of the 2010 general election, only one national newspaper, the *Mirror*, declared unequivocal support for Labour.

Following the change of government, Cameron was initially to rely heavily upon the communications team headed by Andy Coulson to brief and to spin on his behalf (and to speak on behalf of the government). Coulson, however, having been long dogged by the phone hacking scandal that took place at the *News of the World* during his time as editor, was forced to resign from Cameron's employ in January 2011. He was replaced by another media professional, Craig Oliver, who had extensive broadcasting experience working for Independent Television News and the BBC. Cameron, it seems, following Coulson's enforced departure, is slowly moving back to the Blair and Brown model of having a professional communications team composed both of Conservative special advisers such as Gabby Bertin, Alan Sendorek and Henry Macrory and civil servants led by Steve Field and Jenny Grey (Montgomerie 2011). This is very much in the mould of Gordon Brown's communications team

and echoes the way Tony Blair tried to operate following the departure of the highly political – and often abrasive – Alistair Campbell.

The media and the 2010 general election campaign: the impact of the televised leaders' debates

The general election of 2010 was one of the most closely fought in living memory. It was, therefore, a campaign in which the media were always likely to play an important role. But few could have predicted just how important this role would turn out to be. The reason was Britain's first live televised party leaders' debates. These three events dominated media commentary across all platforms – television, press and online – for more than three weeks of the four-week campaign.

The terms of engagement for the debates emerged during the early part of 2010, after more than 70 individual rules had been hammered out in numerous meetings involving party strategists and broadcasters. The agreed format required that questions were not presented to candidates in advance of the debate, that audience members would not applaud, shout or heckle, that programme producers would not use cutaway shots explicitly focusing on the audience's reaction to statements, and that the debate moderator would not introduce material outside of the scope of the audience's questions (ITV *et al.* 2010). The format's design was therefore politicised. During the campaign itself the rules became the subject of 700 complaints by party activists to the British broadcasting regulator, OFCOM (Sweney 2010).

For each of the debates, which took place in Manchester, Bristol and Birmingham, the three candidates stood side by side behind lecterns and faced the presenter and a small, handpicked, studio audience. The candidates gave tightly scripted one-minute opening and closing statements, then responded to a range of questions from the audience. This was followed by periods of varying length during which the leaders directly engaged with each other. The first half of each debate was assigned a specific policy theme: home affairs, international affairs and the economy.

As occurs in the United States, broadcast media and the press heavily trailed the television debates during the opening stages of the campaign and coverage ratcheted up during the first week of the campaign proper, culminating in two days of preview features on television and in the press. The entire week following the first debate was decisively shaped by media reaction to those first 90 minutes in Manchester and this established a pattern for the reporting of the subsequent debates. Television's treatment was dominated by commentary from an assortment of 'body

language experts', 'language experts' and opinion-polling companies. Broadcast media also made much of 'spin alley': a backstage space set aside for the post-debate huddles involving journalists, politicians and the parties' press officers. By the third debate, television news ran a great deal of behind-the-scenes material showing the parties' communications teams grouped with numerous journalists.

The scheduling of the debates had a crucial influence on their impact, creating the perfect conditions for a powerful cycle of coverage and commentary. All three ran on Thursday evenings, in television's hallowed 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. prime time. This ensured close integration with the rhythms of the British media's regular politics, commentary, and opinion cycle, which now reaches a crescendo with the weekend newspapers and the Sunday political television shows. The television audience for the first debate, hosted by ITV, was 9.4 million. The second was hosted by Sky News, a satellite and cable-only outlet, but it was also aired by the BBC News channel, ensuring a total audience of 4 million. The third, run by the BBC, was watched by 8.4 million (BBC News Online 2010a).

In keeping with Britain's hybrid media environment, live television coverage of the debates was accompanied by instant reaction based on snap online polls on the broadcasters' websites and small studio panels of citizens operating sentiment dials which generated real-time reaction 'worm' charts overlaid on top of the live streaming video. Overall, during the first 90-minute debate, 184,000 individual Twitter messages were produced, as users structured their commentary and conversations using shared hashtags. The messages flooded in at an average rate of 29 per second, as 36,000 individual Twitter users engaged in real-time discussion (Tweetminster 2010). This continued the emergent role played by Twitter and Facebook as backchannels adopted by the politically interested to form ad hoc discursive communities around major television events – a practice that first came to prominence during British National party leader Nick Griffin's controversial appearance on the BBC's *Question Time* in October 2009 (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2010).

Within a few minutes of the end of the first debate, polls from YouGov/*The Sun*, ComRes/ITV, Sky News, Angus Reid and Populus all showed Nick Clegg to be the clear winner. Conservative leader David Cameron came second in all but one poll (*Guardian*, 16 April 2010). Following a weekend of remarkably positive broadcast and press coverage from newspapers across the entire political spectrum, the Liberal Democrats started the third week of the campaign with a huge boost in the opinion polls. Some polls placed them on an almost equal footing with the Conservatives; in most, Labour were unexpectedly relegated to third place (Young 2010). Even the *Sun* carried Clegg's victory on its Monday morning front page (Dunn 2010). Broadcast journalists, too,

began to exercise much greater scrutiny over the Liberal Democrats' policy platform. Suddenly, the election had become a genuine three-party contest.

The increase in support for the Liberal Democrats greatly unsettled the Conservative-supporting newspapers, especially the *Mail*, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, who were torn between reflecting the rise of Clegg – clearly a major political story with a popular grassroots narrative – or turning their fire on the Liberal Democrats. This tension was resolved in a couple of days. Once it became clear that 'Cleggmania' was not likely to dissolve in the short term, the right-wing press turned, producing torrents of critical coverage in the run-up to the second debate. The *Mail* ran an extraordinary series of stories on Clegg, one suggesting that the Liberal Democrats' leader had uttered a 'Nazi slur' on Britain in 2002 when he had suggested that victory in the Second World War had made it more difficult for the British to accept that other European countries enjoyed greater prosperity (Shipman 2010). The night before the second televised leaders' debate, the *Telegraph* announced that its debate-day front page would feature what it claimed was an investigative scoop: a report that Clegg, before he had become party leader, had received party donations from three businessmen directly into his personal bank account (Winnett and Swaine 2010). The *Telegraph* had trawled through the archive of documents it had bought in order to run its months-long series of exposés on MPs' expenses in mid-2009. Clegg was given a chance to respond to the story before it published and he issued a statement saying that he had used the money to pay for a member of staff and that these donations were reported in the parliamentary register of members' interests.

But during the morning of the second debate there unfolded an extraordinary series of events. As news of the *Telegraph's* 'scoop' reverberated through media and online networks, it became obvious that a large proportion of journalists – on both right and left – were sceptical of the *Telegraph's* front-page story. By mid-morning, a satirical online flash campaign had emerged. Tens of thousands of Twitter users sardonically added the hashtag '#nickcleggsfault' to their status updates. These messages ranged from political observations to ludicrous statements such as 'We've run out of houmous #nickcleggsfault,' 'Lunch meeting was cancelled at the last minute. So obviously #nickcleggsfault'. By the middle of the day this had become the third most popular shared hashtag, not just among the 7.5 million Twitter users in the UK, but the entirety of the service's 105 million registered global users. Suddenly the *Telegraph* was thrown on the defensive. Sensing that the Clegg donations story was not being as well received as he had perhaps hoped, its deputy editor, Benedict Brogan, took the highly unusual step of issuing a defence on the paper's political blog. The story was dead.

Arguably the most important single development in the British media's treatment of politics since the arrival of television during the 1959 election race, the televised leaders' debates altered the course of the campaign, propelling Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, into the media spotlight as his party rose in the opinion polls immediately following a 'winning' performance in the first debate. While the surge fell away during the final week of the campaign and did not directly translate into seats gained for the party on polling day, 'Cleggmania' arguably had three important effects. First, the Manchester debate established that precious commodity – campaign momentum – for the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives and Labour were on the back foot until very late in the race. Brown was a consistent loser in the media commentary and the snap polls following all three debates. Cameron was widely perceived to have disappointed during the first two events. He staged a strong recovery during the third, but this came just a few full campaigning days before polling day. Second, because the Liberal Democrats ended the campaign with a 3 or 4 percentage point increase in their share of the popular vote, when compared with their position in the pre-election opinion polls, they avoided being wiped out in some seats by the powerful electoral swing to the Conservatives. Their total of 57 seats could easily have been substantially lower had they not benefited from the boost provided by the debates. Third, Clegg's strong performance enhanced his overall credibility with the media and the public, smoothing the Liberal Democrats' transition into coalition government with the Conservatives on May 11.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the political communication environment in Britain is in transition. While broadcasting still remains at the heart of national political life, the nature of mediated politics is evolving rapidly and in directions that are sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary. The election leaders' debates reinforced television's predominance, though as we saw above, even those events were accompanied by a panoply of online activism, some of it facilitated by the broadcasters themselves.

The way citizens consume political information is changing in the new digital environment. As use of the internet and mobile technologies has grown, so they have become an important port of call for those seeking political news. Audiences have never had access to so much political information through such a variety of news outlets. At the same time, these technologies provide new opportunities for audiences to engage in

political activities, express their opinions and contribute content in historically unprecedented ways. The evidence suggests that growth in the numbers taking advantage of these interactive opportunities is likely to continue.

There are, however, cautionary themes. Concerns about the stratified nature of the digitised public sphere remain. Those that take advantage of new technologies to participate in politics remain a minority and still tend to be wealthy, well educated and younger. Second, this new communicative digital space has also impacted upon politicians and media organisations, creating opportunities, but at the same time new uncertainties. Established news outlets remain a visible presence but face financial pressures. While news organisations have responded innovatively, competition, shrinking audiences and lower revenues – especially from advertising – have negatively affected their resource bases. There have often been no alternatives to cost cutting. The public service provider, the BBC, has fared well up to now, but it too is likely to face future financial constraints, and this may well have implications for the quality of news citizens receive.

Politicians and their strategists have been forced to adapt to a rapidly pluralising digital sphere. Party leaders have promoted themselves using a range of interactive features to try and connect with citizens, albeit with varying degrees of success. While the internet has opened up new ways for politicians to interact with the public, it has also posed a series of challenges. Some aspects of the online information environment have proved difficult to control. The fast-moving news cycles require constant monitoring and are significantly more difficult to direct. The public spread of gossip and rumour is perhaps more common place. While political elites have been keen to be seen embracing new media, they are understandably less keen to be seen reverting to necessary but dubious methods of control. The leaked emails that led to 'Smeargate' reveal, not only that some old command-and-control techniques of the broadcast era are still hugely important, but also that the new media environment is inherently porous. Understanding the complex new political communication environment in the twenty-first century remains a challenge, but one to which students of politics must rise if they are to fully comprehend the nature of British democracy.

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