

ROTTWEILERS SAVAGE DEMOCRACY

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What I have to say here is part of a broad and long-standing debate, about the role of the media in our political culture. This debate has focussed in recent times on the question of voter apathy and general disengagement, especially amongst the young, from our democratic process. I will put the view that some types of media content are part of the problem here, and that those involved in mediating politics to the people have responsibilities which they have not yet faced.

Jonathan Sacks¹ spoke for a growing constituency when he called for our mass media (and he was speaking particularly of television) to be 'unafraid to claim the high ground of civic discourse and great ideals'. I take the 'high ground of civic discourse' to mean the conduct of our national conversation in a constructive and respectful way. Our national mass media provide the stages and the groundrules for much of that conversation, and so are highly influential in determining whether it is conducted in a civil way. In particular, they will set standards of courtesy, and can show us how to approach politics in an open-minded way, driven by humane curiosity about the world and the wish to understand other people's positions.

Which programmes *least* embody the ideal of civic discourse as civil conversation, based on courtesy and a wish to discover things about other people and the world? In case this talk about civility and courtesy gives the wrong impression, let me say that I am not going to put the argument that TV has been dumbed down, or

¹ 'Television, narrative and conversation', in *Culture and Communications* ed. S. Higdon, ITC 2001.

tabloidised. There are serious questions to ask about the tabloid coverage of politics, but I am more concerned here about problems at the 'broadsheet' end of the media spectrum. Is it possible that a broadcast genre often celebrated for its integrity may be more damaging to our political culture than a lot of 'tabloid' style programming?

We all know about the rottweilers, the aggressively challenging interviewers who bite lumps out of politicians. They are often applauded as they do so, and feted as a major democratic advance on their forbears, the deferential interviewers who let politicians get away with murder. Brian McNair² notes the 'commonplace assumption that [their]...approach is both legitimate and necessary', and that they 'confront the politician with what the public wants to know'. He concludes that they provide 'an important if sometimes flawed means of broadcast analysis and interpretation of political rhetoric' (p.88).

However another possibility must be considered: that these dogs are a threat to the public, in the sense that their clamorous barking is like a form of noise pollution which impairs the quality of democratic life in our public space. Or to take a more extreme analogy: their mauling of politicians provides a spectacle like those of criminal entertainments where vicious dogs are let loose on some other despised creature, and the worst is brought out in the audience.

Of course the sceptical persistence of an interviewer may sometimes perform an importantly useful role in opening an aspect of political reality to public gaze. But amongst the rottweilers, scepticism is enveloped in cynicism and hostility, in an

² *Introduction to Political Communication*, Routledge 1995, pp. 86-7.

attitude which on a daily and basic level is likely to have a number of adverse effects on audiences.

It is likely to promote cynicism about politics, it gratuitously polarises arguments and people, and it militates against creative thinking about problems in society and how to tackle them. Overall it brings a negativity and fractiousness to the emotional tone of our politics. This is in an age when the decline of traditional party affiliations and the rise of personal and emotional agendas in many areas of life means that the emotional appeal of politics is of increasing importance.³

These are obviously serious charges against an influential form of media content. Not only are the rottweilers accepted, they are probably widely popular. And in many cases it is easy to see why this is so. They can transmute instantly into loveable labradors. When not baring their teeth, they may come over as humorous, warm and decent people. Their approach to personal topics is often sensitive, and their treatment of non-politician interviewees is usually very respectful. Arguably this makes their contribution to political culture all the more damaging, as they are easily identified with and have high credibility. They are probably seen as nearer to the TV 'news presenter', who is trusted by 66% of the population to tell the truth, than they are to the 'journalist', trusted by 18% (MORI, February 2003).

However a number of voices are now being raised questioning the trends towards attack and disrespect in news and current affairs presenting and in British political

³ See Barry Richards & Joanne Brown, 'The therapeutic culture hypothesis', in Johansson, T. & Sernhede, O., eds., *Lifestyle, Desire and Politics*, Daidalos, 2002, 97-114; Barry Richards, 'The emotional deficit in political communication', *Political Communication*, forthcoming.

journalism as a whole. Some like John Lloyd⁴ are from within journalism. Some politicians too are fighting back (for example Charles Clarke and Kenneth Clarke, and Clare Short), and other critical voices are from academia. Leading media academic Steven Barnett⁵ has identified four phases of political journalism in the UK. From the post-war 'age of deference', in which journalists were 'fawning and submissive' to politicians, we have passed through the 'age of equal engagement', when both interviewers and their subjects were prepared to engage in civil debate, and then the 'age of journalistic disdain', in which journalists adopted attitudes of 'detached scepticism'. Now, he argues, we are in an 'age of contempt', in which journalists have moved from informed questioning to a 'relentlessly negative approach' and to 'unthinking ridicule' of politicians. Barnett likens his historical model to accounts of the evolution of American journalism in the same period. Sabato⁶, for example, has described three phases, in which the journalistic role in the US has gone from 'lapdog', to 'watchdog', then to 'junkyard dog'. In the current 'junkyard' phase, journalists conduct themselves in ways that are 'rude, arrogant and cynical'.

As well as this kind of historical framing, another kind of input which academics can make to this debate is in the careful scrutiny of what is actually said in interviews, and in the analysis of how this might be received by audiences. After a preliminary analysis of a sample of interviews on the BBC Radio 4 'Today' programme, I sketched a typology of common forms of attack by interviewers. Giving new life to an old cliché, these could be called 'soundbites'. We can expect the same types to be found

⁴ 'Media manifesto', *Prospect* 79, October 2002, pp. 48-53. Another example from within journalism was the BBC2 programme 'Trust me I'm a politician' (8 February 2003), which raised the possibility that aggressive interviewers were putting people off politics -see Michael Cockerell, 'Are these men to blame for making us sick of politics?' *The Guardian* 4 February 2003.

in television interviews, where the visual cues of facial expression and other body language can enhance their delivery.

I propose that there are three main categories of bite: accusing, bossing, and wedge-driving. Accusations come in five different sub-types. Interviewees are accused, usually in slightly less direct language than this, of being fools, weaklings, turncoats, bigots or liars. Bossing comes in various forms, all intended to construct the interviewee as the moral inferior of the interviewer. I have so far identified finger-wagging (usually conveyed in tone of voice), chopping off (interrupting an answer and moving the interview on), and the Parthian shot (closing a topic or a whole interview with a damning aside). Lastly, wedge-driving involves a form of questioning that is designed to demonstrate that whatever policy or practice with which the interviewee is trying to solve a problem or resolve a conflict will inevitably fail. The interviewer is in effect pressing the case that 'the shit will hit the fan', and that whatever antagonisms are involved in the issue to hand are irreconcilable ones.⁷

Why are the accusatory, contemptuous and cynical words of interviewers a problem? What is their impact on audiences? Evidence from audience research which has probably not been undertaken would be necessary to answer that question fully and with complete confidence, but we can reasonably propose that there are two serious risks here to the health of our political culture.

⁵ 'Will a crisis journalism in journalism provoke a crisis in democracy?' *Political Quarterly* 73(4), 2002, pp. 400-408.

⁶ Larry Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*, Free Press 1991.

⁷ Audio files with examples of these 'soundbites' are available from the author on request.

1. One is linked primarily to the accusing tendency, though it is also reinforced by contemptuous bossing. It is that respect for politicians, confidence in the democratic political process and belief in the sphere of politics as a worthy field of human endeavour are further eroded. Of course trust in politicians and in politics may have been in crisis anyway for other reasons, to do with the limits and flaws of political institutions, and the shortcomings of individual politicians. But instead of encouraging us to see these problems as potentially remediable, Rottweiler interviewing leads us to despair and to call a plague on all their houses.

This is not only because politics is presented as adversarial ritual. Nor is it only because one politician after another, across the political spectrum, is treated as a potential or actual fool, weakling, chameleon, bigot or liar. It is also because the interviewers, with whom as audience we spontaneously identify, take up one contradictory position after another. In order to retain a confrontationist stance with different interviewees, the interviewer must first adopt one position, then – with equal relish – its opposite. As John Humphries has pointed out⁸, he cannot believe in all positions. So we are schooled by the presenters as our role models in the assumption that positions are things to be adopted for argument's sake only. There is a current of urbane nihilism in this, and it carries us far beyond a subtle use of devil's advocacy to clarify a debate, into a world where we have argument for argument's sake (at which point most people close down on politics, as they do on Parliamentary yah-boo) and where nobody can be believed. Comprehensive cynicism, or an impractical idealistic rejection of the world as it is, are the only positions then available.

⁸ See Paul Donovan, *All Our Todays*, Jonathan Cape 1997, p. 135

2. Secondly, there is an effect likely to flow from the wedge-driving practice, which seeks to demonstrate that problems are unresolvable and conflicts are absolute. If it has any effect on how the audience understand politics, this must encourage views of the world as hopelessly ridden with unmanageable antagonisms. Such views either lead in turn to more cynical despair, or feed fundamentalisms of all kinds. This compulsion of journalists and especially interviewers to try and drive wedges into negotiations as they are taking place is something we have heard and seen much of in the Iraq debate, and is one area where we may wonder at times about how aware some journalists are of their responsibilities in the political process.

The wedge-driving proclivity of interviewers invokes impoverished ways of thinking amongst audiences, for whom new resolutions and creative compromises are less likely to be entertained as they fall outside the poles of antagonism to which the interview constantly returns.

Overall this has a corrosive effect on thinking. Now it is a piece of conventional wisdom in media research that the media cannot tell us *what* to think, but they can tell us *what to think about*. In fact this power of agenda-setting can amount to a power to tell us *how* to think. At least it aspires to that: the recurrent message of much political journalism, and especially of the radio and television interview, is that we must think in cynical and pessimistic ways. We must assume that politicians are adopting incoherent or unworkable positions, and that they are striving to hide inconsistencies, cover up failures and deny conflicts with colleagues or allies.

There are two issues here that should be noted. One is the complicity of politicians in their own humiliation. Despite robust examples over the years of refusals to be 'kebabbed', many allow themselves to be bullied and pilloried with regularity. There seems to be a variety of motives for this. Some politicians have said how much they enjoy the antagonistic encounters with interviewers, seeing them as another part of the pleasurable scrapping of politics, perhaps implying that there is a harmless theatricality to these contests. Others seem to grit their teeth and accept it unquestioningly as a price of the job, a regrettable necessity in which the main thing is not to get upset. And of course there is the view that politicians have made a major contribution to the evolution of the interview by their increasing use of it as an opportunity to make particular statements regardless of the questions, and by their schooled evasiveness, tactics which provoke the interviewer into more aggressive questioning just as the news management techniques of government have hastened the descent of the press into junkyard journalism. To say this doesn't condone the rottweiler style, but does help to explain its rise, even if the growth of news management was itself a response to an already disrespectful and wayward fourth estate.

The second is the relationship of aggressive interviewing to the question of interviewer bias. One research study has found⁹ that more dominant and aggressive interviewers show more preferential behaviour. Where interviewers are self-indulgently expressive, as is increasingly the case, the possibilities for differential treatment of interviewees via non-verbal channels are greater. Even though interviewers appear uniformly hostile to all, subtle differential effects may build over

⁹ Elisha Babad, 'Preferential treatment in interviewing: evidence from nonverbal behaviour', *Political Communication* 16(3), 1999, pp. 337-358.

time in relation to individual politicians, if not parties, or occasionally swamp an individual interview. So although systematic bias is not now such a major issue in media treatments of politics, the fierceness of the rottweilers may vary in more idiosyncratic ways.

Overall, we need to ask where this rottweiler distemper comes from, and what sustains it. Let's consider two socio-cultural sources of the phenomenon, one on the supply side and one on the demand side.

On the supply side, many of today's leading presenters, while very varied as characters, are people whose intellectual formation was inevitably much influenced by the radicalisation of the intelligentsia which occurred in Britain in the seventies. While the theories of revolution which led this radicalisation are no longer widely held, they have left a broad legacy in an underlying worldview which is still prevalent amongst liberal/left people, especially in academia and the media. In this worldview, as John Lloyd has pointed out, truth is assumed to be always hidden, requiring aggressive digging to reveal it. It is also imagined to reside ultimately and only in conflict; politics is seen as basically about the fomenting and exploitation of conflict, and the role of national political leaders is often to conceal conflict or pronounce false solutions to it. And this worldview also starts from the assumption that most authorities, and especially political leaders, are corrupt or degenerate.

This mindset is perhaps better seen as an emotional toning of outlooks rather than as a substantive cognitive worldview. It now predominates in the treatment of politics across all media outlets, and feeds the rottweilers in their urges to tear up the delicate

compromises and uneasy alliances which politics partly consists of. And too much political journalism appears to be guided more by this suspicious and acerbic mood of the elite rather than by considerations of what would best contribute to a forward-looking and inclusive democratic culture.

On the demand side, we need to ask why audiences are prepared to watch the rituals of aggressive cross-examination to the extent that they are. Barnett in fact partly blames audiences, in his argument that a major driver of the 'age of contempt' is the deregulation of the media, which has led to increased competitive pressures on journalists and editors to appeal to audiences with displays of nastiness and other forms of circulation- and ratings-boosting sensationalism. We should be wary of analyses that rest too heavily on the basically elitist assumption that mass audiences always want the cheap and the nasty, but there is clearly some appetite for blood amongst the audiences of programmes such as Newsnight and C4 News.

There are several complementary ways to understand the origins of this. One is that we are all influenced by the general culture of contempt which as argued above has been a negative fall-out of the radicalisation of the intelligentsia. We may not all spontaneously embrace it with as much enthusiasm as our metropolitan opinion-leaders in the media elites, but we have enough of it to be willing spectators of various blood-sports. The current popularity of various forms of 'nasty TV' in quiz shows and reality TV is evidence for this.

Another is to do with the way in which the serious media treatment of politics is traditionally a rather dry business, lacking the everyday repertoire of human feeling.

While stylised forms of ideological passion (for things like the NHS, the pound and education) are routinely expressed by politicians, the messier side of emotional life is not part of the media discourse of politics. Little air-time is given to exploring how complex the emotional bases of these positive commitments may be, nor to how both politicians and citizens are influenced in their political decisions by negative feelings such as guilt and envy, and by mixed feelings of doubt and ambivalence.

Of course it is a key responsibility of the media to help create a space for politics in which personal and emotional factors can be subjected to a calm and rational scrutiny. But what we can call the *emotional deficit* in political discourse, the absence of a spontaneous and full range of emotional expression, leaves audiences hungry for anything which engages the passions and brings some psychological life and colour to the intellectually demanding work of figuring out what is best for us as a society. If all that is on offer is a kind of courtroom drama led by interviewers fired with righteous passion, then people will go for that. But excessive consumption of this kind of material brings on a fever of negativity in a disillusioned audience, not clear thinking by an engaged citizenry. It may succeed at times in *exposing* the worst of politicians, but it risks *bringing out* the worst in all of us.

What's the alternative? Some of today's interviewers, journalists and columnists convey a sense of the intellectual and emotional complexity of politics. In Barnett's historical account, there was a brief period in between deference and cynicism, when journalists approached politicians as equals, in a spirit of constructive engagement, and interviewing styles were grounded in courtesy and intellectual curiosity rather than scalp-hunting. Perhaps we can hope, in the post-war self examination of our

political culture currently under way, for a restoration of this approach, as part of a larger ambition for our media to make more positive, respectful and emotionally complex contributions to political debate.

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