

## British civilisation and institutions

### **The media (2 sessions)**

THE TERM 'MEDIA' MAY INCLUDE any communication system by which people are informed, educated or entertained. In Britain it generally refers to the print industries (the press or newspapers and magazines) and broadcasting (terrestrial or earth-based television, cable and satellite television, radio and video). These systems overlap to some extent with each other and with books, film and the Internet; are profitable businesses; and are tied to advertising, sponsorship, commerce and industry.

The media have evolved from simple methods of production, distribution and communication to their present sophisticated technologies. Their growth and variety have greatly improved information dispersal, news availability and entertainment opportunities. They cover homes, places of business and leisure activities and their influence is very powerful and an inevitable part of daily life. For example, surveys indicate that 69 per cent of Britons obtain their daily news from television, 20 per cent from newspapers and 11 per cent from radio. Electronic technology, such as the Internet, is an important part of media, business and education, while the British use of home-view videos is the highest in the world.

But the media provoke debates about what is socially and morally permissible in their content and methods. Questions are asked about the role of advertising and sponsorship, the quality of the services provided, the alleged danger of the concentrated ownership of media resources, influence on politics, restraints upon 'free expression' and the ethical responsibility of the media to individuals and society.

#### **The print media**

The print media (newspapers and magazines) began to develop in the eighteenth century. Initially, a wide circulation was hindered by transportation and distribution problems, illiteracy and government licencing or censorship restrictions. But, over the last two hundred years, an expanded educational system, abolition of government control, new print inventions and Britain's small area have eliminated these difficulties and created allegedly free print media.

The growth of literacy after 1870 provided the owners of the print media with an increased market. Newspapers and magazines, which had previously been limited to the middle and upper classes, were popularized. They were used for news and information, but also for profit and entertainment. Ownership, new types of print media and financially rewarding advertising increased in the competitive atmosphere of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Owners also realized that political and social influence could be achieved through control of the means of communication.

#### **National newspapers**

National newspapers are those which are mostly published from London (with some regional versions) and are available in all parts of Britain on the same day, including Sundays. Many are delivered direct to the home from local newsagents by newsboys and girls. The good internal distribution systems of a compact country enabled a national press to develop, and Internet online copies now offer updated and immediate availability.

The national press in Britain today consists of ten daily morning papers and nine Sunday papers. It is in effect a London press, because most national newspapers have their bases and printing facilities in the capital, although editions of some nationals are now published outside London, in Europe and the USA.

National papers are usually termed 'quality' or 'popular' depending on their differences in content and format (tabloid or broadsheet). Others are called 'mid-market', fall between these two extremes and are tabloids. The 'qualities' (such as The Times) are broadsheets (largesheet), report national and international news in depth and analyse current events and the arts in editorials and articles. The populars (such as the Sun) are mostly tabloid (small-sheet), deal with relatively few 'hard news' stories, tend to be superficial in their treatment of events and much of their material is sensationalized and trivialized. It cannot be said that the downmarket populars are instructive, or concerned with raising the critical consciousness of readers. But owners and editors argue that their readership demands particular styles, interests and attitudes. 'Mid-market' papers, such as the Mail and Express, cater for intermediate groups.

Sales of popular papers on weekdays and Sundays far exceed those of the 'qualities'. 'Qualities' are more expensive than populars and carry up-market advertising that generates essential finance. Populars carry less advertising and cater for more down-market material. However, the press takes much of the finance spent on total advertising in Britain.

There is no state control or censorship of the British press, although it is subject to laws of publication and expression and there are forms of self-censorship, by which it regulates its own conduct. The press is also financially independent of the political parties and receives no funding from government (except for Welsh-language community papers).

### **Regional newspapers**

Some 1,300 regional newspapers are published in towns and cities throughout Britain. They contain a mixture of local and national news; are supported financially by regional advertising; and may be daily morning or evening papers, Sundays or weekly. Some nine out of ten adults read a regional or local paper every week and 75 per cent of local and regional newspapers also operate an Internet website.

### **Periodicals and magazines**

There are 9,000 different periodicals and magazines in Britain, which are of a weekly, monthly or quarterly nature and are dependent upon sales and advertising to survive. They are aimed at different markets and levels of sophistication and either cover trades, professions and business (read by 95 per cent of occupational groups) or are consumer titles dealing with sports, hobbies and interests (read by 80 per cent of adults).

### **The broadcasting media**

The broadcasting media are divided into public and commercial (independent) sectors and consist of radio, terrestrial television and cable/satellite television. Three authorities oversee these services: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Radio Authority.

Radio was the first broadcasting medium to appear in Britain. Experimental transmissions were made at the end of the nineteenth century and systems were developed in the early twentieth century. After a period of limited availability, national radio was established in 1922 when the British Broadcasting Company was formed under John Reith.

In 1927 Reith became the first Director-General of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and set the tone and style for the BBC's development. The BBC had a monopoly in broadcasting and a paternalistic image. Reith insisted that it should be independent of government and commercial interests; strive for quality; and be a public service broadcaster, with a duty to inform, educate and entertain. The BBC built a reputation for impartial news reporting and excellent programmes, both domestically and internationally.

The BBC's broadcasting monopoly in radio and television led to pressure from commercial and political interests to widen the scope of broadcasting. As a result, commercial (independent) television financed by advertising and under the supervision of the Independent Television Authority (ITA) was created in 1954 and the first programmes were shown in 1955. The BBC's monopoly on radio broadcasting was ended in 1972 and independent radio stations were established throughout the country, dependent on advertising for their financing.

### **The BBC**

The BBC is based at Broadcasting House in London, but has stations throughout the country, which provide regional networks for radio and television. It was created by Royal Charter and has a board of governors who are responsible for supervising its programmes and their suitability. They are appointed by the Crown on the advice of government ministers and are supposed to constitute an independent element in the organization of the BBC. Daily operations are controlled by the Director-General, chosen by the board of governors.

The BBC is financed by a grant from Parliament, which comes from the sale of television licences (£1.6 billion per year). These are payable by anyone who owns a television set and are relatively cheap in international terms (£104 annually for a colour set). The BBC also generates considerable income from selling its programmes abroad and from the sale of a programme guide (Radio Times), books, magazines and videos.

### **The ITC**

The ITC (Independent Television Commission) does not make or produce programmes itself. Its government-appointed board regulates the independent television companies (including cable and satellite services). It grants licences to the transmitting companies and independent producers who actually make many of the programmes shown on three advertising-financed television channels (ITV/Channel 3, Channel 4 and Channel 5).

### **The role and influence of television**

Television is an influential and dominant force in modern Britain, as well as a popular entertainment activity. Over 98 per cent of the population have television sets in their homes; 95 per cent of these are colour sets; and over 50 per cent of homes have two sets or more. Some people prefer to rent their sets instead of owning them because rented sets are repaired and maintained free of charge. However, recent reports (2001) suggest that radio (commercial and BBC) is now more popular than television, indicating that some people are deserting the latter because of its alleged superficiality. Nevertheless, television has an average viewing time of 26 hours per week.

A large number of the programmes shown on television are made in Britain, although there are also many imported American series. A few programmes come from other English-speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada. But there are relatively few foreign-language productions on British television and these are either dubbed or subtitled. The range of programmes shown is very considerable, but they also vary widely in quality.

Although British television has a high reputation abroad, it does attract substantial criticism in Britain, either because of the standard of the programmes or because they are frequently repeated.

News reports, documentaries and current-affairs analyses are generally of a high standard, as are dramatic, educational, sporting, natural history and cultural productions. But there is also a wide selection of series, soap operas, films, quizzes and variety shows which are of doubtful quality. The recent addition of Reality-TV (such as Big Brother and Survivor) and similar genres has led to charges of a 'dumbing-down' of British television.

Competition between the BBC and independent television is strong, and the battle of the ratings (the number of people watching individual programmes) indicates the popularity (or otherwise) of offerings. It is also argued that competition has reduced the quality of programmes overall and resulted in an appeal to the lowest common denominator in taste. The BBC in particular is criticized for its failure to provide high-quality arts, drama and news programmes, with a slide into commercialism in the battle for ratings. It is argued that the BBC must maintain its public service obligations to quality and creativity in order to justify its universal license fee.

Voices have been raised about the alleged levels of sex, violence and bad language on British television, particularly before the 'watershed' of 9 p.m. when young children may be watching. Some individuals have attempted to reform and influence the kind of programmes that are shown.

### **Media ownership and freedom of expression**

The financial and ownership structures of the British media industry are complex and involve a range of media outlets, which include the press, radio and television. Sometimes an individual company will own a number of print products, such as newspapers and magazines, and will specialize in this area.

But this kind of ownership is declining. Today it is more common for newspapers to be owned and controlled by corporations which are concerned with wide media interests, such as films, radio, television, magazines, and satellite and cable companies. Other newspaper- and media-owning groups have diversified their interests even further, and may be involved in a variety of non-media activities. In Britain, only a few newspapers such as the Guardian and the Morning Star have avoided being controlled by multinational commercial concerns.

This involvement of large enterprises in the media, and the resulting concentration of ownership in a few hands has caused concern. Although these concentrations do not amount to a monopoly situation, there have been frequent inquiries into the questions of ownership and control. Some critics argue that the state should provide public subsidies to the media industries in order to prevent them being taken over by big-business groups. But this suggestion has not been adopted, and it is felt that there are potential dangers in allowing the state to gain any direct or indirect financial influence over the media. Today the law is supposed to guard against the risks inherent in greatly concentrated ownership of the means of communication. The purchase of further newspapers by an existing owner is controlled by law. These arrangements are intended to prevent monopolies and undue influence by owners.

The question of free expression in the media continues to be of concern. Critics argue that the media do not have sufficient freedom to comment on matters of public interest. But the freedom of the media, as of individuals, to express themselves, is not absolute. Regulations are placed upon the general freedom in order to safeguard the legitimate interests of other individuals, organizations and the state, so that a balance between competing interests may be achieved.

### **Attitudes to the media**

Apart from the issues discussed above, opinion polls suggest that the media are not a source of great concern to most British people. Respondents are reasonably, if not overly, satisfied with the BBC and independent broadcasters. However, most are generally very skeptical of the press and journalists, and mistrustful of the content of newspapers.

It is difficult to evaluate absolutely whether the media play a dominant part in influencing public opinion on a range of political and other matters. The left-wing view assumes that they do and consequently disapproves of the alleged right-wing bias in the British media. But, while some people may have their attitudes directly shaped in these ways, it is argued that a majority of readers and viewers have already made up their own minds and react against blatant attempts at indoctrination. On certain occasions and for specific events (such as general elections), the media may have an important effect on public opinion. But it is also likely that the media may merely follow popular trends.