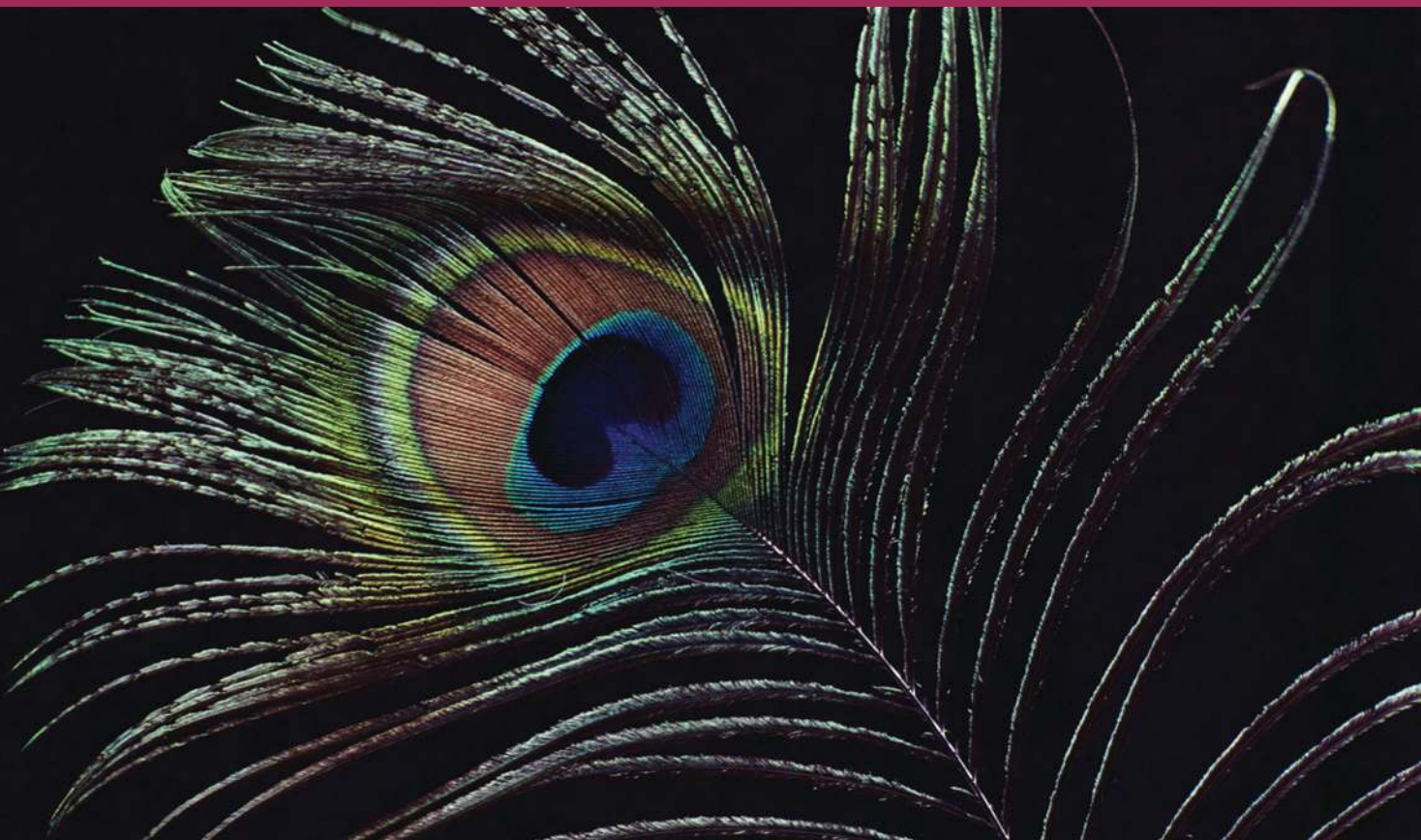


## CHAPTER 4

# Media context of contemporary public relations and journalism



## Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to

- identify the dynamic structures of radio, television and the press and their implications for the day-to-day practices of journalism
- recognise the changing structures of concentrated ownership in the UK media industry and use media theories to make sense of them
- discuss the implications of contemporary regulation of the media for the public interest
- evaluate arguments for the distinctiveness and importance of the idea of ‘the public interest’ and explore how ‘public interest’ is created
- discuss the globalisation of media ownership, new technology and media audiences that affect the UK media context
- consider the ways in which the contemporary media context causes problems for the ethical behaviour of journalists and public relations practitioners.

## Structure

- Contemporary media context: the UK media industry
- Theories of media
- Regulating the media: from public interest to the market
- ‘Public interest’
- Issues for public relations arising from the global media environment
- Ethics of journalism and public relations

## Introduction

At 6.07am on the morning of Monday 27 May 2003, Andrew Gilligan, a BBC journalist and defence correspondent, reported live on air on BBC Radio 4’s flagship morning news programme, *Today*, that:

*the central claim in his [Prime Minister, Tony Blair’s] dossier which he published in September [2002, was wrong] . . . [he] knew that the forty five minute figure was wrong even before it [the government] decided to put it in . . . Downing Street . . . ordered a week before publication . . . it to be sexed up, to be made more exciting and ordered more facts to be . . . discovered. (Coates 2004: our emphasis)*

This news report then includes an extremely serious allegation. The allegation was that the serving prime minister and his ‘spin doctors’ pressured the intelligence services to report selectively the information they had and subsequently carefully edited it in order to justify the political goal of military engagement to topple the Iraqi regime. This news report was repeated in a toned-down form later on the same day on Radio 4, Radio 5 Live and in the BBC1 *10 O’Clock News*. It became the object of broader radio, television and newspaper coverage concerning the Labour government’s case for a ‘war on Iraq’ and its attempt to convince public opinion of the ‘serious and current’ threat posed to the UK’s interests by Saddam Hussein’s regime. It subsequently became a key concern of the

Hutton Inquiry set up to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly, a senior ‘weapons of mass destruction’ scientific expert, who was found to have been the key source of Andrew Gilligan’s story.

Although the government was exonerated by the Inquiry, there is no doubt that public trust in the prime minister was shaken by these events. Furthermore, the BBC director general and chairman were pressured to resign (see also the BBC Case study in Chapter 17) after having been found to have been irresponsible in checking the editorial procedures that had allowed Gilligan to make his claim. This may have additional repercussions when the operating conditions of the BBC are considered under the 2006 Charter review.

What is highlighted by this news story and the subsequent media and political debate are the dynamic *political, economic and social conditions* under which contemporary journalism is carried out and the ethical considerations to which they give rise. Some have argued that in combination these factors have produced a *culture of spin* in which truth is secondary to attempts to influence the public for the benefit of private interests (Pitcher 2003).

Newspapers, which are subject to little regulation, have received the most blame for encouraging this culture of spin, although, as our example shows, other media are also implicated. This is the *media context* in which journalists and public relations practitioners engage in cooperative and conflictual relationships and which structures the news that citizens/readers/listeners rely on in order to make sense of the world.

## Contemporary media context: the UK media industry

The communication media discussed in this chapter are the national newspapers, and radio and television stations that are available to the majority of the population of the United Kingdom. The UK has privately owned media in which corporations control large sections of the press, radio stations and television. This is known as *concentrated media ownership* and

these features of concentrated ownership are broadly similar to other European countries (Kelly et al. 2004). Some larger and more diversified media corporations own newspaper chains, magazine chains, radio and television. This is known as *cross-media (concentrated) ownership*. The broad outlines of media ownership in the fast changing sector of each medium in the UK today are represented in the next section.

**Definition:** *Concentrated media ownership* refers to sections of the press, radio and television that are concentrated into a few companies or corporations.



PICTURE 4.1 The ‘Iraq dossier’ was produced by the UK government to argue its case for the war in Iraq. Its publication and subsequent media reporting had major political and media repercussions. (Source: © Reuters/Corbis.)

## Communication media

### Newspapers

There are 1000 newspapers in the UK, including hundreds of local papers, 12 national dailies and 14 national Sunday papers. In 1997, 87% of sales were of newspapers owned by the top four newspaper groups, with Rupert Murdoch’s News International accounting for 33% of all national daily press sold (Stokes and Reading 1999). National newspapers employ 2500 journalists, down from 3500 in the early 1970s, while the number of pages in daily newspapers increased between 63% and 125% between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s (Davis 2000). This has led to the increasing reliance of journalists on information from public relations practitioners who provide them with press releases and a decrease in the likelihood of investigative reporting.

Despite an increasing population, daily national newspaper sales declined by 6% between 1992 and 2002 and the sale of Sunday nationals declined by 13% in the same period (McNair 2003). This has led not only to a more concentrated and massively competitive market, in particular between *tabloids*, but also to attempts by the *broadsheets* to change in order to maintain market share.

**Definition:** *Tabloids* are small-format newspapers, sometimes referred to as the ‘popular press’, often written in a sensationalist style and containing a large number of photographs.

**Definition:** *Broadsheets* are large-format newspapers, sometimes referred to as ‘serious’ or ‘quality’ newspapers.

Beginning with *The Independent*, for example, some broadsheets changed to a ‘compact’ format that looks more like a tabloid newspaper. In order to maintain readership, papers have engaged in ‘*exclusives*’, ‘*tabloidisation*’ and a variety of price-cutting strategies. These changes in the press have lent dynamism to the culture of spin since it has not been obliged by law to meet requirements of objectivity or impartiality.

**Definition:** *Exclusives* are stories that are made available to one newspaper about issues and people (for example, an interview with Princess Diana’s former butler). ‘*Exclusives*’ are often supplied by public relations consultancies on behalf of their clients.

**Definition:** *Tabloidisation* occurs when a ‘quality’ broadsheet attempts to broaden its appeal to popular interests – for example, through a greater focus on ‘human interest’ stories and celebrity gossip.

## Television

There are five national *terrestrial* UK TV channels: BBC1 and BBC2, ITV, Channel4 and Channel5. The last two started broadcasting in 1982 and 1997 respectively. There are 14 ITV licences, which have been amalgamating since the early 1990s and which are now owned by three companies: Granada Media, Carlton Communications and Scottish Media Group (Doyle 2002b). Since the mid-1980s, satellite television has emerged as an important TV provider in the UK, with BSkyB as the leading company, although it has taken until 2001 to become highly profitable (Doyle 2002a). Satellite TV has led to increased access to multi-channel television, including important new news providers such as Sky News and CNN.

**Definition:** *Terrestrial channels* are television channels that broadcast from the soil of the UK and not via satellite. Terrestrial channels are subject to greater regulation.

The government White Paper on Communications (DCMS-DTI 2000) showed the importance of these developments: in December 1980, UK viewers had access to 400 hours of television per week; by 2000 this had increased 100 fold to 40,000 hours. This has led to increased competition and a fall in audience share for all terrestrial channels. For those dependent on advertising for income (ITV, Channel4, Channel 5) this has led to potential falls in total income – held at bay, for now, by the massive expansion of TV broadcasting to 24 hours a day for these broadcasters.

## Radio

There are five BBC national FM/LW radio stations (1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 Live) and three national commercial

### box 4.1

#### Impact of media commercialisation in the UK: implications for public relations

The key effects of the dynamic commercialisation of media for public relations have been:

- the extension of the media cycle to 24 hours puts pressure on journalists actively to seek stories across the whole day and opportunities for public relations practitioners to place them
- the competitive ‘chasing’ of opportunities to be in contact with particular audiences (publics) means organisations of all kinds must think carefully about how they can use specific media to access niche audiences
- the expansion of the size and economic weight of media corporations in comparison with national media gives them greater market control
- greater emphasis on profitability and the economic benefits of media market control
- an increased role for independent producers and small media companies providing services to larger ones and therefore also of cultural intermediaries who design media products for fragmented audiences
- the expansion of freelance positions in journalism and public relations and a consequent increase in personal and professional competition for secure employment in these professions
- greater opportunities for, and difficulties in, media management for corporations and governments.

**activity 4.1****Evaluating media content and context**

Review the media available to you where you live. Check what choice of newspapers, radio stations and terrestrial news you have access to. Can you find examples of the transformation of media context discussed in this section – for example, the 24-hour media cycle, concentrated media ownership, a greater role for freelance employees and the targeting of niche audiences?

stations (Classic FM, Talksport and Virgin AM). The BBC also runs 38 local radio stations and there are about 200 local commercial stations. Commercial radio in the UK started late, in 1973, when independent local radio (ILR) was set up. ILR station owners have benefited from the capacity to merge and have 'become national operators by stealth' (Barnard 2000: 55). They include Capital and GWR, who owned all or substantial shares in 14 and 28 stations respectively in 2000. Since the early 2000s, digital (DAB) stations have been developed both by the BBC (BBC 7, BBC 6 Music, BBC Asian) and the commercial sector (Core, Life, Oneworld) as well as DAB access to existing FM stations (Radio 4, BBC World Service, Classic FM) (Bobbett 2002). The expansion of radio stations in the 1990s led to a growth of 184% in radio's share of the national advertising market (Barnard 2000) and a multiplication of chances to access *niche audiences* for advertisers on the commercial stations (see Box 4.1 – earlier – and Activity 4.1).

**Definition:** *Niche audiences* are groups with shared interests who are traditionally hard to reach. Radio programmes that target Asian youths, retired people or jazz fans, for example, allow advertisers to reach a better defined audience than mainstream broadcasters.

**Theories of media**

The above 'facts' in themselves tell us little about why changes are occurring and what they mean for the role of the media in society. They need to be analysed within theories of media. In detailing different theories that interpret these changes in different ways we necessarily enter into controversies.

**Liberal pluralism**

This is a key theory in media studies and also the main 'common sense' assumption of media commentators. As such, this theory is rarely explained clearly. It is assumed that the mass media play predominantly informative roles in our society: that

they give citizens access to a variety of facts and opinions that enable us to make up our minds on the key issues of the day. This approach is not concerned about *media concentration* in itself. Rather it focuses attention on whether media concentration makes a difference to the *variety of information and ideas* we have access to. It is assumed that, as long as a very basic variety of media with different views is available, then the actual details of ownership are irrelevant.

Pluralism (diversity) of sources of information is the key issue for liberal pluralists, who assume that market-based media typically produce competition between different media owners and therefore the required variety of sources of information. From this perspective the concentration of media only rarely becomes so great as to close down sources of alternative ideas.

Liberal pluralist theories additionally construct the journalist as *autonomous* within these plural media worlds – not overly affected by anything other than the news values of timeliness, newness, etc. that guide journalistic practice (van Zoonen 1998; Campbell 2004). Other media theorists are less optimistic on this point (Davis 2002). Liberal pluralism only appears at all plausible in societies where media are relatively free from state control. Many societies do not benefit from this (limited) good fortune.

**Political economy of media**

Political economy theories view the question of diversity of media in quite a different way. They tend to be suspicious about liberal pluralist claims that we experience diversity or plurality in media. Rather they argue that a superficial multiplicity of coverage in our newspapers and in radio and TV hides a more general lack of *diversity* of opinion expressed in them precisely because of the concentration of media ownership (Mosco 1996).

In discussing the consequences of the concentration of mono-media and cross-media ownership, political economy approaches focus on the *power relations* that control the production, distribution and consumption of media (Mosco 1996). The state and corporations are considered to be the most powerful media actors. The implication of this power is that certain people get to decide what ideas and views people will and *will not* have access to and further will influence the perspectives that are used to discuss those views (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Mosco 1996; Philo, 1999). In this model, contrary to the liberal pluralist focus on the autonomy of journalism, journalists and the editorial practices of media are seen as responsible for the lack of diversity of coverage since they are the authors of the media stories.

## Institutional/contextual analysis of media

*Institutional* (or contextual) theories of media have arisen in relation to the other two dominant theories. Barnett and Gaber (2001) argue that for both liberal pluralists and political economy approaches '*the identity of the media owners is irrelevant*' (our italics). Political economy approaches, they assert, assume that media coverage 'will by definition uphold the basic nostrums of *capitalism*' (2001: 58.) and, as we have already seen, liberal pluralism assumes that if ownership is widespread enough then media will 'ensure that a proper plurality of views . . . will be available' (ibid.).

**Definition:** *Capitalism* is an economic system based on privately owned businesses producing and distributing goods, the key features of which are a free, competitive market and making a profit from the sale of goods and services.

In contrast, Barnett and Gaber do consider the activities of *particular* media owners and investigate the subtle and particular influences that are brought to bear on journalists through owners' enforcement of particular practices of editorial control and, for example, the appointment of editors with views consistent with their own.

Above all, however, Barnett and Gaber suggest focusing more attention on the journalistic environment in which influence comes not so much from the particular actions of owners as from *everyday operational and journalistic practices* (p.59). To fill strict deadlines on a regular basis, it is simply much easier to sit at a desk, phone regular sources and rely on the provision of press releases by public relations practitioners in the local and national governments, corporations, trade unions and pressure groups (Davis 2000; Campbell 2004). In this context, some sources – government and corporations – have more resources and influence than others. It is this context of journalism as the brokering of perspectives and views of sources in its dynamic and disputed context that is a

more appropriate framework for understanding contemporary media. Like the political economy approach, the contextual approach recognises that *power relations* are crucial, but considers that *power is diffused* throughout the day-to-day activity of media rather than concentrated in the hands of elites in the state and corporate world (see Think about 4.1).

### Regulating the media: from public interest to the market

Recognition of the power of media has led to regulation. Regulation of broadcasting has depended on making clear the distinction between public and private interests and the idea that it is appropriate for broadcast media to have to serve the 'public interest'. As a result, broadcast media have been subject to law and policy since the 1920s in the UK and across Europe, to encourage some diversity of expression that supports this aim. The balance between public and state interest has varied across European countries in the twentieth century (Humphreys 1996). Regulation has involved:

- requiring the provision of certain kinds of content necessary to the public (news, current affairs, science, educational and religious programming), ensuring impartiality of media coverage and universal accessibility of media provision
- disallowing monopolisation of mono- and cross-media ownership.

### Broadcast media

Currently, broadcast media in the UK are regulated by a new combined regulator, the Office for Communications (OFCOM), which took over the roles of five previous regulatory bodies in the sphere of broadcasting and telecommunications, and the conditions of the BBC Royal Charter, at the end of 2003. The need for a combined regulator was argued by the Labour government to encourage the dynamism of the media market in the UK and recognise convergences between technologies that were blurring the

## think about 4.1 Media power and the limits of liberal pluralism

With the analysis of media context and content you carried out in Activity 4.1 you can also raise questions about the limits of liberal pluralism in making sense of media content.

- Does the variety of information and type of ideas we have access to depend on control over media by powerful owners or the state? (What stories are emphasised and what neglected in a five-minute radio news bulletin? How are they covered and how does that encourage you to think of the people or institution which is the object of the broadcast story?)
- What constrains the so-called autonomy of the journalist that liberal theory insists on?
- Which everyday journalistic practices define the form and contents of journalists' stories?

**box  
4.2**
**Aims of the broadcast media laws**

- To encourage media to deliver economic performance for itself and to benefit the UK economy. This market philosophy has increasingly affected the BBC since audiences have become an important measure of accountability and a major factor in arguments for increasing or maintaining the level of the licence fee.
- To allow for greater levels of concentrated mono- and cross-media ownership (even breaking with some of the controls over non-UK nationals' ownership of UK media).
- To de-emphasise some elements of the previously accepted public service philosophy and incorporate a new focus on consumers.

boundaries between broadcasting and telecommunications. Similar debates have been occurring in most other European countries (Kelly et al. 2004).

Public policy concerning broadcasting ownership has regularly been related to concerns over *genuine pluralism of the media* (as discussed above) and the fear that privately owned media could not, on their own, provide all of the required media needs of the public (Doyle 2002a). Since the 1980s, government policy concerning media has encouraged the role of media as economic actors that benefit their owners and the broader population. Previously it had always

been thought that the *free market* and *public service* philosophies were incompatible. Conservative governments led the way in market-oriented media policy (Goodwin 1999) through the Broadcasting Act of 1996 and, following the election of a Labour government in 1997, the OFCOM Act of 2002 and the Communications Act 2003 which took it further. These laws are summarised in Box 4.2.

The mission statement of OFCOM (which can be found on the home page of its website) is evidence of these shifts. Its stated role is in 'serving citizen-consumers in the digital age' (our italics). The shift to



PICTURE 4.2 Ratings wars: *Strictly Come Dancing*, shown on BBC on Saturday evenings, delivered an estimated peak audience of 11.2m compared to ITV's 9.9m viewers of *The X Factor* (*The Guardian*, 13 December 2004) – evidence of the BBC's efforts to appeal to consumer interests. (Source: Kieron McCarron/BBC.)

a market-based policy puts in doubt some of the historic regulation of media for the public interest by giving greater power to the private interests of corporations at the expense of a still greater commitment to media pluralism.

**Definition:** *Free market* means the idea that businesses – in this case media organisations – operate competitively without government interference to provide a service that the market wants.

**Definition:** *Public service* represents the idea that broadcast media have a responsibility to provide a service to inform, educate and entertain the public. Implicit in this idea is that minority interests are catered for.

## The press

In contrast to broadcast media, and in common with most of Europe, the press in the UK has been self-regulated. Since the 1990s, the industry has regulated itself through the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), but as an organisation it has only advisory powers and a voluntary code of practice. It works by means of speedy judgements made over complaints about particular media stories (often involving privacy issues), rather than through the much slower systems whereby complainants go through the courts. It does not operate according to an ideal of public service but more like the ‘complaints department of a commercial organization’ (Petley 1999: 155).

The lack of effective demand for the press to meet public service requirements similar to those of broadcast media is indicative of the power of organised press interests in resisting any attempts to impose constraints on the industry. To find out more about the PCC and its role, go to [www.pcc.org.uk/students/faqsanswered.htm](http://www.pcc.org.uk/students/faqsanswered.htm) (see Activity 4.2).

## ‘Public interest’

Although, as we have seen, regulation of broadcasting in the UK has been based on the distinction between *public and private interests*, this distinction is, in

### activity 4.2

#### Questioning broadcasting regulation

In the UK, OFCOM regulates to encourage both media diversity and a competitive UK media industry. What tensions arise in achieving these different outcomes? Are the interests and needs of citizens and consumers always the same? How does OFCOM balance them? (Take a look at OFCOM’s website at [www.ofcom.gov.uk](http://www.ofcom.gov.uk))

fact, greatly contested. There are philosophical difficulties in defining interests at all since they seem to require distinguishing consumer wants and desires from what might be termed ‘real’ interests (Lewin 1991). This opens up the potential for *paternalistic* administration of peoples’ ‘real’ interests that are known by experts, but not by people themselves.

**Definition:** *Paternalism* is when an elite group of people, often experts, make decisions on behalf of the general public, about what is ‘good’ or appropriate.

We need to explore the concept of the public interest since it has been of enormous importance in the history of *representative democracy* and in the way media have been perceived as a public resource.

**Definition:** *Representative democracy* is a system of democracy whereby people are allowed to vote for somebody to represent them in government. In the UK, this happens at local level in council elections and at national level in the House of Commons.

One of the first distinctions to be made is between public interest and private interest. It may be in a sports fan’s private interest – or to their advantage – if television covers sports extensively, even to the exclusion of, say, news and current affairs programming. It would not be in the public interest, however, since news programming is necessary for the public in general to become and remain informed about important issues affecting public life. The latter programming would benefit all whereas the former organisation of sports television would benefit only a minority.

The second important distinction is between public interest as *shared private interests* and a more radical conception of the public interest as ‘the interests of the public as a collective body’ (Heywood 1999: 243). For the former a good example would be the provision of security against external aggression: this is a private interest that all members of the community have in common. What distinguishes the more radical conception of public interest is that we do not conceive of it as the collective interests of individuals but as *them as a collective body*.

This radical public interest is difficult to measure. This is the case, in part, because politicians regularly use such collective concepts in a very loose way (‘the common good’, ‘the national interest’) and as a result they become devalued. In addition, the public is ‘included’ as a reference point in politicians’ speeches and also the media programmes. For example, the use of opinion polls, vox pop interviews (‘voice of the people’) and phone-ins constantly elicits and



manufactures the opinions of some members of the public as one measure of where the public interest lies. Because of this the public interest as an idea has been subject to growing criticism. It is also difficult to measure because scholars and politicians have used ideas for talking about the public that assume that people are primarily, or entirely, motivated by selfish interests. This discussion has arisen, to a degree, in line with the increased focus on market-oriented media.

It is convenient for media providers to believe that people are self-interested and that the 'public interest' is an incoherent conception. In that way they do not have to serve the public and perhaps will avoid the language of the public altogether. Alternatively, they can use it inappropriately as in the case when a large minority of the population chooses, individually, to consume the same media programme (soap opera audiences of 17 million in the UK, for example) and this is taken as a measure of the public interest (common interest) when, at best, it measures only what some members of the public have *shown an interest in*.

In addition to this distinction between the public interest as a shared interest in common between all and something that has interested a large minority of the population, there is an important distinction to be made with regard to narrower publics. Imagine any interest group organising to effect changes in their local radio station – for example, in broadcasting more 'local' issues. In order to organise they need to discuss and debate, set policy and organise the practical circumstances of any action they take. Such a group is organising the collective interest of the group they gather together. As such they are one example of an emergent public (one of many such 'publics' – see Chapter 12). Imagine likewise, a small audience of a local cable television programme. They are interested in the programme but do not necessarily, as an audience, further interact with each other or influence each others' thinking or action. As such they are merely an *aggregate 'public'*, one of many 'publics'.

**Definition:** An *aggregate public* is a group of individuals who make up an audience for a television programme but who do not necessarily interact and influence each other.

The relation between the different concepts of public/publics can be seen in Figure 4.1.

What is generally termed the public interest (B) relates to interests people have collectively, whether or not they are aware of them. It is an emergent phenomenon arising in relation to the needs (rather than merely wants) of 'the public' as a collective entity. 'Emergent' refers to the creation or recognition of in-

	Aggregate	Emergent
The public	A What people are (happen to be) interested in	B The public interest
Publics	C What a group or stakeholders are interested in	D The collective interests of a group or stakeholders

FIGURE 4.1 Aggregate and emergent concepts of the 'public interest'

terests arising out of the interaction of people. This view holds that the discussion, debate and cooperation of views are crucial in order to articulate the public interest rather than merely adding together (aggregating) the views of individuals. There can be similar emergent interests for small subgroups of society or 'publics' (D).

The *aggregate* versions of the public or 'publics' (A and C) are measured not by needs recognised in debate but rather the desires, wishes or proclaimed preferences of individuals. Further these are merely added together (aggregated) rather than being themselves a product of debate and discussion. Aggregate conceptions of public or publics are often used by commercial companies to argue that what people buy or watch en masse is (simply) the interest of that public or those publics. The concept of the public interest, on the other hand, allows (and requires) a critical assessment of these preferences.

Heywood (1999) has cogently argued that the emergent conception of the public interest (since it can be used to deny people's expressed preferences in order to fulfil their 'needs' or 'interests') is a device often used manipulatively to give 'the public' something that those in authority desire them to have. Fortunately, the public interest can be shown to exist even if the clear identification of that public interest can always be contested, for the following reasons: first, an unrestrained pursuit of self-interest is self-defeating (therefore something other than mere self-interest must exist); and, second, and most importantly, in the existence of *public goods*.

**Definition:** *Public goods* are required by everybody but no one, individually, has an incentive to produce. Examples of these are energy conservation and the problems of pollution.

Public goods also exist in the media sphere where neither individuals nor market forces will produce them. They have been described as: 'general education,

## think about 4.2 The public interest

Why might we want to distinguish between the public interest defined as the aggregation of individual decisions (like 16 million people deciding to watch a football match) and the debate and discussion, through media, whereby a sense of the public interest might emerge? (For example, should we be shown terrorists’ videos of real executions?)

If we use this distinction, does it make a difference to how we understand the roles of broadcasters?

objective information, universally accessible media of communication, public libraries . . . markets provide these things at best *unequally, if at all*’ (Leys 2001: 220, our italics).

These goods, Leys suggests, would not be provided by the private or market sector because the level of profits attainable from their provision is simply too low. If this is the case then we have a powerful reason for recognising the public interest and then regulating media on that basis (see Think about 4.2).

### Public interest and the problem of paternalism

The difficulty in clearly articulating where the public interest lies opens the concept to paternalistic roles for experts. This makes provision for the public interest inherently problematic (Scruton 1983). There might, for example, be a variety of ways of providing for the public interest in media. Vasquez and Taylor, for instance, argue that ‘public interest is partly created and sustained through a process of communication’ (2001: 149). Two important consequences follow from this:

- 1 ‘Public interest’, although important in its requirements and consequences, does not have any *simple and easily identifiable existence* outside public debate about what it might be: to fully exist, ‘public interest’ needs to be articulated and identified in wide-ranging and inclusive discussions.
- 2 The fact that public interest does not exist independently of discussion means that media have a crucial role to play in *providing the resources and the environment* through which conceptions of the public interest can be articulated and debated.

Traditionally, as we have seen, national broadcasting has been charged with providing the context in which ‘public interest’ can be debated. However, there are several reasons why the communicative creation and maintenance of the public interest places the BBC and terrestrial channels, which in the UK also have public service duties, in difficulties.

First, the BBC has never been independent enough of government – which selects the director general

(DG), and through the DG the board of governors, and sets the level of the licence fee – to articulate a public interest philosophy in a coherent and consistent manner free from government control.

Second, even when the BBC has been able to act more independently than at present, it was not able to act in a self-evident public interest – which, as we have seen, must be created in debate. What it did was *interpret* a public service philosophy of what was *good* for the audience without giving the audience the resources to articulate alternatives. The BBC has acted, for the most part, as if *servicing the public* were unproblematic. The relatively low level and indirectness of the accountability of the BBC to its audiences means that there has been little check on how adequately it has actually done so.

Third, it is not perfectly clear how well and fully the BBC has served the public interest in providing *pluralism of media content*.

**Definition:** *Media pluralism* means ‘the presence of a number of different and independent voices, and of different political opinions and representations of culture within the media’ (Doyle 2002b: 11, our italics).

But to what extent have the BBC and the terrestrial channels carried this out? The BBC’s definition of impartiality in its news, politics, and current affairs programming has been interpreted in terms of the presentation of the views of the governing political party (currently Labour), the opposition (in this case, the Conservatives) and, to an extent, the Liberal Democrats. Although inclusive in one way it also excludes a variety of other minority political parties or viewpoints (different and independent) from debate and discussion.

The BBC has been very slow in allowing groups to represent themselves, preferring to allow expert makers to produce programming (representations of culture). How often do minority groups get to make programmes themselves, especially for mainstream, rather than specifically minority, audiences?

Although there is genuine disagreement on precisely how much pluralism has been delivered by public service broadcasting, there has been enough

**activity 4.3****Paternalism and the public interest**

Find examples of media defining what is good for people to read, watch or listen to. How have they used their editorial power to close down debates? How do they represent (if at all) the variety of views, cultures, lifestyles and attitudes in your country or region today?

disquiet on this point to encourage the development of normative approaches that emphasise radical reform of the media system in order to fulfil the demands of pluralism for the public interest. Curran (2000) suggests the supplementation of the existing public service and the private enterprise sectors to empower people precisely by 'enabling them to explore where their interest lies' through access to a thoroughly pluralistic media. He suggests the development of new media sectors to supplement the existing commercial and public service ones. This is in line with Vasquez and Taylor's (2001) emphasis on the communicative creation of the public interest. The difficulty is that these concerns seem both necessary and also quite idealistic in a context where media policy has made a long move towards market philosophies. This move is occurring within European countries (Kelly et al. 2004) and across the world (Doyle 2002b) (see Activity 4.3).

**Issues for public relations arising from the global media environment**

The shift of media regulation from a public to a more market-based philosophy also marks a broader globalisation of media and of the media environment that affects the practice of public relations and journalism. The contexts that have changed are:

- globalisation of media ownership (whereby media moguls from one part of the world own newspapers, radio and TV stations all over the world and link them in global economic strategies)
- development of new media formats, frameworks and platforms
- important technological developments
- changes in audiences' loyalties.

**Globalisation of media ownership**

The concentration of mono- and cross-media ownership, already examined with regard to the UK, also has a worldwide dimension. From the 1960s, alongside the increase in general transnational and global companies (TNCs), we have seen the rise of global media companies.

For example, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns newspapers, publishing companies, and TV and radio stations across the UK, the USA, Australia and the Far East. This enables control over media markets, the deployment of economies of scale, and cross-media subsidisation on a global scale. Increasingly, media corporations have become part of global conglomerates with more tightly organised relationships to making profits in a context where serving *which* public interest becomes a fundamental, and very complex, question.

**New formats, frameworks and platforms**

New, smaller scale, global media organisations have been created around new products and media formats. CNN is a key example since its global reach is not only economic, but relates also to cultural globalisation through the provision of new media outlets that create a sense of the news 'worldwide' (Volkmer 1999). Established media providers such as the BBC, through its World Service radio and TV broadcasting and its planned Arabic-language TV service, has expanded into this new global news market, as have providers from the Arab/Muslim world such as Al-Jazeera TV (El-Nawawy and Iskander 2002), (in)famous for playing videotapes of Osama Bin-Laden's speeches. Al-Jazeera has itself diversified further during 2006 with the setting up of an English language version, employing established western journalists. Satellite has provided a new media platform for the delivery of media services, often by new methods of payment such as the subscription model most famously employed with success by BSkyB, whose income now exceeds that of the BBC. Once such a new platform is widespread, it encourages the dynamic commercial provision of alliances between media companies for establishing the distribution of new channels and services. Concerns over *convergent* technologies have, as we have already seen, been taken up into UK media regulation policy.

**Definition:** *Convergence* refers to the process of technologies coming together from different directions. The mobile telephone is the product of the convergence between telecommunications (sending/receiving messages) and computers (processing information). Once in existence, the phone can also be used to combine (converge) further technologies – taking photographs using the phone for example.

**Technological developments**

The availability of inexpensive new technology is also being used to change the roles of public relations personnel and journalists – the ethical dilemmas of



PICTURE 4.3 Al-Jazeera TV is (in)famous for playing videotapes of Osama Bin-Laden's speeches which have subsequently been broadcast worldwide through western media channels. (Source: © Maher Attar/Corbis Sygma.)

which we shall explore later in this chapter. The technological developments of light digital cameras, highly portable sound equipment, mobile global communications and the internet have led, according to Bennett and Entman (2001), to a paradoxical outcome: 'flattening media and political power hierarchies as concentration of media ownership and co-operation grows' (pp.478–479).

A tension has been created between TNCs motivated by control over existing markets and small, but sometimes worldwide, media companies aiming to create markets for new media products. These media products are designed for technological tools and communication devices that allow space and time, and thereby lives, to be reconfigured. The mobile telephone is the most dynamic recent example of myriad 'time-shifting' technologies developed for domestic and personal use since the video recorder in the late 1970s. These technologies open up new possibilities for small companies but also encourage the further intensification of 24-hour media culture. This leads to the customisation of media production and consumption. For example, the contemporary digital mobile phone allows companies to commercialise ring tones and news services. Individual mobile phone users access what services they like, although often they are only making 'choices' from menus set by TNCs.

The customisability of media production and consumption via new technology is thus a double-edged sword. It can lead to challenges to the powerful media elites but also the erosion of conceptions of 'the public interest' as media users make *individualised* choices and thereby consume a very different array of images, sounds and symbols from their neighbours.

While some welcome the world wide web as aiding the dissemination of genuine news, others argue that

it will lead to an extension and intensification of the 'culture of spin' (Pitcher 2003).

## Changes in loyalty

The contemporary media environment challenges the older one. As media outlets increase in number, the potential is always present for the erosion of previously settled audience loyalty. The share of the TV market for BBC1, for example, has reduced in line with the expansion in audience access to a wider range of terrestrial and non-terrestrial TV channels. With regard to news, for example, this means that BBC1 early evening news which had 8.2 million viewers in 1989 now gets 5.9 million viewers (McNair 2003) in spite of an increased UK population. The media environment is now that of the *fragmentation of audiences* and there is deep concern that it is no longer possible to talk about such communicatively constructed entities as 'the public'. These shifts in the attention of audiences are likely to continue and some have feared it will lead to the end of 'the public' altogether (Boggs 2000; Franklin 2004). These changes raise questions about new options for public relations personnel and the creation of new potential employers.

The new global media environment, as a product of economic globalisation and concentration of media ownership and the fragmenting effects of new formats, new technology and changed loyalties of audiences, leads to a world of exciting possibilities but it is also one of increased insecurity and risk and greater ethical dilemmas. These changes also raise difficulties in espousing and fulfilling public interest aspects of professional codes of conduct, as the next section seeks to explore.

## Ethics of journalism and public relations

The transformation of the global media context raises both new and, in a more insistent manner, older ethical questions for those working in journalism and public relations. As we have seen, the competitive and dynamic nature of the industry discourages the public interest role of journalists whose work is tending to become more an adjunct to the private profit functions of media corporations. It also works with the dominant culture of journalism, which emphasises technical skills rather than the reflective and ethical approaches the globalisation of the media requires. New ethical dilemmas raised in this context include whether it is possible to restrict ethical consideration

**box**  
**4.3**
**Professional codes of ethics**

Codes of ethics produced by professional bodies perform a variety of roles (Banks 2004). They can be:

- rhetorical devices: to establish or legitimate the role of the profession
- aspirational: establishing values which cannot now be practised with any regularity but are ‘an ideal to strive for’
- educational: offering a standard and way of approaching ethical concerns rather than detailed guidance to individual cases.

Source: Banks 2004: 117–121

to one country alone (Keeble 2001) and how the intercultural complexity brought to firms and countries through globalisation can be appropriately served (Day et al. 2001). The working lives of journalists and public relations practitioners occur in a variety of settings. The division of complex working lives across different employers, work practices, technical skills and work groups discourages broader thinking about ethical concerns and makes it difficult to establish the links needed to create responsibility for issues more general than ‘getting the job done’ and to resist the agenda-setting activity of more powerful actors. Further, their roles, as we discussed earlier, are interdependent, and this has led to sometimes bitter jurisdictional or power struggles between journalism and public relations (Pieczka and L’Etang 2001).

It is instructive to understand both occupations as involved in strategies of professionalisation (Collins 1990; Macdonald 1995; Friedson 2001). Such strategies have the joint aims of producing monopolies in the market for their services based on claims to expertise and to lead to fuller recognition within the social order (Macdonald 1995). Many occupations have tried to professionalise in this way in order to ‘evade the control of others’ (Collins 1990) in the work situations of contemporary society. In order to do so, as Friedson (2001: 214) argues: ‘They must persuade others that the discipline is of special value either to the public at large or to an important interest of the state or an influential elite’.

We can see this process in the way both the UK’s National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) have updated their professional codes since the mid-1980s to take on board changes in society and media. Neither occupation has been very successful in claiming special knowledge nor does either seem to have incorporated the overwhelming majority of potential practitioners into their respective occupational bodies. Of

late they have put more effort into trying to show that their work is of special value to the public, while not imposing too powerful constraints on practitioners who might be reluctant to join if membership would damage their occupational chances. Both therefore have changed professional codes in ways that *decrease* the sanctioning power of the organisation over practitioners who fall foul of them. In this respect, they are aspirational and rhetorical documents (see below) rather than codes that really restrict and sanction inadequate or unethical performance.

Both the NUJ and the CIPR highlight the role of ‘the public interest’ in their codes of practice in seeking to persuade others of their integrity. The NUJ Code of Conduct forbids intrusion into people’s private lives unless there are ‘overriding considerations of public interest’ (section 6).<sup>1</sup> The section of the CIPR’s Code of Conduct on ‘principles of good practice’ suggests that an important part of their integrity as a profession lies in ‘honest and responsible regard for the public interest’, which might override the responsibility towards client confidentiality if ‘the public interest is at stake’.<sup>2</sup> Both codes can be found at, respectively, [www.nuj.org.uk](http://www.nuj.org.uk) and [www.cipr.org.uk](http://www.cipr.org.uk)

Since professions, in part, define themselves in terms of the special knowledge and practices in which they engage, codes of ethics embody arguments or claims for professional autonomy: for the right to set one’s own goals and standards (see Box 4.3). The CIPR has recently obtained its own charter and in achieving this has had to demonstrate the reputation of an established profession (Pieczka and L’Etang 2001; Morgan 2004). Involvement of the CIPR can be seen in the

<sup>1</sup> Find at [www.nuj.org.uk/inner.php?docid=59&PHPSESSID=dc9f4e22a758f1b28b8953o2989cc5](http://www.nuj.org.uk/inner.php?docid=59&PHPSESSID=dc9f4e22a758f1b28b8953o2989cc5)

<sup>2</sup> Find at [www.cipr.co.uk/Membership/membership.htm](http://www.cipr.co.uk/Membership/membership.htm)

light of the debate concerning 'spin' arising in relation to the findings of the Hutton Inquiry, in particular the roles of journalists and public relations practitioners in the attempts to convince public opinion of the potential challenge to the UK's national interest posed by the Iraqi regime. In the UK, both professional bodies have been rethinking their relationship to the culture of spin in the light of the reports on government communications (Phillis, Hutton and Butler) and, in the aftermath of the Hutton Report, the BBC's Neil Report into journalistic and editorial roles. Is it possible that the culture of spin is an artefact of a particular configuration of circumstances: of competitive media, slack and inappropriate regulation of the press and a particular culture of journalism and public relations that could be significantly changed by efforts in the commitments of the professions and the division of tasks in the media? Such is Pitcher's (2003) argument and the hope of journalists and public relations practitioners who have recently been discussing what might be done. The 2004 President of the CIPR, Professor Anne Gregory, who has been very active in these debates and the attempt to make public relations more trustworthy, thinks so too, as she speculates that 'genuine public relations is ethical and a force for good' (Urquhart 2004). Such a role cannot, however, be merely wished into existence. As John Street argues in relation to journalism, these roles concern power and require changes to 'the allocation of resources and the organisation of practices' (Street 2001: 160). Both journalists and public relations practitioners have, perhaps rightly, often been seen as 'the lapdogs of partial interests, not the watchdogs of the public interest' (p.146.).

However, if the culture of spin is the product of a linking of circumstances, it might be amenable to change. Such change would need to face the tough challenge of the professional codes of the NUJ and CIPR, meeting in practice their aspirational and rhetorical functions. In its newly acquired chartered status, the CIPR will need to demonstrate both a sharpening of its code and also evidence that it is properly monitored and enforced (cf. Friedson 2001). Such a demonstration of trustworthiness will involve real change, requiring public relations practitioners

### activity 4.4

#### Impacts of the global media environment

Look for examples of any one of the issues discussed here:

- globalisation of media ownership
- new formats, frameworks and platforms
- technological developments
- changes in audience loyalty.

What difference do they make to individuals' consumption of media? What difference do they make to the role of the journalist? What difference do they make to the role of the public relations practitioner?

### activity 4.5

#### Public interest and the ethics of public relations

Does public relations contribute to the 'culture of spin'? Find some 'best case' examples where public relations as a profession lives up to Professor Anne Gregory's exacting requirements to be ethical and promote 'the public interest'.

to recognise conflicts of interest between truth telling and 'trying to keep clients happy' (Morgan 2004; Ryle 2004). Professor Gregory sees the need to face these difficulties since 'making consistent ethical decisions in a diverse world where cultures and values clash is not easy' (Ryle 2004). The benefits of chartered status might, however, be so great as to be worth the effort to demonstrate trustworthiness. Practising in a media context in which quick fixes, fast decisions and the exploration of ethically dubious opportunities are quite routine will prove exacting, if worthwhile. If success in the charter process does lead to 'work in *the public interest* to promote the highest standards of ethical public relations' (YEP 2004, our italics) then we shall all benefit. The critical attitude implicit in the analysis of the power of occupational roles will require tough questions to be asked of any claims that the charter process has produced such an outcome (see Activities 4.4 and 4.5).

## Summary

This chapter has discussed the UK media context of contemporary public relations and journalism, highlighting the central role of media ownership, together with changing media regulation, practices and technologies in today's global environment. The changing nature of media audiences from mass consumers to personal users of media was identified. Key theories for understanding the media context were discussed and, in particular, the issue of

'the public interest' that underpins many assumptions about the role of media in society. Our discussion led to questions of ethics for both the public relations practitioner and journalist raised by public concern around 'the culture of spin' and of whether the aspirations of professionalism for both occupations can help solve the problems inherent in a public sphere where vested commercial interests are at stake.

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