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**MEDIA
CULTURE**

**HELEN BIRTWISTLE
& JAMES GLEDHILL**



**DEBATING MATTERS
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GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“THE MEDIA ARE
RESPONSIBLE FOR
LOWERING
THE LEVEL OF
PUBLIC DEBATE”**

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INTRODUCTION

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Public trust in politicians is at an all time low and public cynicism about politics has never been higher. But what responsibility do the media have for this? Indeed, what is the responsibility (dead link) of journalists to encourage a high level of public debate and have they been failing in this responsibility? Whilst some believe that the fault lies with politicians inclined to be economical with the truth, others suggest that it's the media themselves that spread cynicism and are responsible for a degradation of public life. Tension between the government and the media came to a head over the Hutton Inquiry [Ref: [BBC News](#)], leading to a period of self-examination on the part of the BBC and other media. Much of the subsequent debate revolved around journalist John Lloyd's polemical case in his book *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*. More recently Tony Blair described the British media as a 'feral beast' [Ref: [Reuters](#)], whose relationship with public life was in dire need of repair. Meanwhile some of his detractors stress that as guarantors of democracy, if anything the media need to be more ferocious [Ref: [Columbia Journalism Review](#)]. Are a robust and adversarial, perhaps sometimes savage, media part of the problem, or is it now more than ever part of the solution to ensuring a vibrant democratic culture of informed public debate?

KEY TERMS

[Fourth Estate](#)

[The Hutton Report](#)



MEDIA CULTURE:

“The media are responsible for lowering the level of public debate”



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What's the problem with the level of public debate?

A generation of citizens less likely to vote or join political parties, public debates conducted through spin and sound bites, falling trust in politicians and rising cynicism about their motivations – it's widely agreed that our public life and culture of debate are not all that they should be. But whose fault is this? Are the media responsible, with the BBC described by one commentator as operating on the 'cynical assumption that politicians are born liars and rogues'? Or are we in danger of shooting the messengers [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and the real situation is that politicians and others shift the blame onto the media in an attempt to conceal their own failings?

What's the role of the media?

Both sides in the debate agree that the media play an essential role in helping to create and sustain a democratic culture in which power is held to account, truth is discovered and lies are exposed. Part of the civic role of the media is providing citizens with the facts required to make informed democratic decisions. Increasingly, the media have gone about performing this role in a more confrontational and far less deferential way, raising questions about whether the media are distorting rather than reporting the facts.

How powerful have the media become?

It has long been acknowledged that the press – the 'fourth estate' [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] – and other media wield significant power in their own right, making the news and setting the agenda rather than simply reporting it. Are the media overstepping their role, supplanting elected politicians and

creating a 'media-ocracy' [Ref: [Guardian](#)] in which they single-handedly set the terms through which we understand public life? Or is this an impression generated because politicians have run out of ideas and arguments and now see media exposure as an end in itself?

Do the media live in a parallel universe?

John Lloyd diagnoses a split between the work of public institutions and the way in which this is reflected in the media. The media adopt a 'they would say that wouldn't they?' attitude towards public figures, taking nothing at face value and always believing there is distortion or deception behind what is said. As a result, he argues, the media and public institutions exist in parallel universes [Ref: [Guardian](#)]: what happens in the world and the journalism about what happens in the world has become detached. Is this right, or is it rather the case that public institutions themselves construct their own parallel universes in an attempt to conceal uncomfortable truths behind slick PR and meaningless jargon, and that it's the job of the media to reveal this?

Should journalists be more civic minded?

Critics of the media [Ref: [Guardian](#)] have argued that what is usually presented as a healthy clash of independent institutions in a democratic society has been turned by the media into a simple struggle for power. Journalists have forgotten their duty to foster a healthy civic culture and new institutions are required to raise journalistic standards. Defenders of the media [Ref: [Scotsman](#)] argue that in the wake of Hutton there is a danger of over reaction and that a well-mannered, civic-minded media



would be a compliant media. The real assurance of democracy is having a rowdy media, instinctively suspicious of those in power.

Are confrontational interview techniques to blame for causing people to switch off?

The journalistic style often referred to as the ‘why is this lying bastard lying to me?’ approach is epitomised by BBC journalists Jeremy Paxman and John Humphreys. Does this approach encourage viewers to switch off? Or is it all part of the cut and thrust of debate, a regrettable but occasionally illuminating necessity in a world where politicians and other figures won’t give a straight answer to a straight question?



ESSENTIAL READING

Media Guardian

10 January 2005

FOR

The Media and public life

Tony Blair Speech *Reuters Headquarters* 12 June 2007

Blair's message for the media

Martin Kettle *Guardian* 12 June 2007

Strip naked for democracy

Albert Scardino *Guardian* 17 February 2005

Time to pension off Paxman

Michael Leapman *New Statesman* 7 February 2005

The fourth estate's coup d'état

John Lloyd *Observer* 13 June 2004

AGAINST

Blair still doesn't get it

Peter Wilby *Guardian* 13 June 2007

Short Cuts

Thomas Jones *London Review of Books* 22 July 2004

Don't shoot the messengers

Mary Riddell *Observer* 27 June 2004

Having a rowdy press is vital to our democracy

Andrew Neil *The Scotsman* 24 June 2004

Feral beast? Try Lemming

Gal Beckeran *Columbia Journalism Review*

IN DEPTH

Never mind the scandal: what's it all for?

Jeremy Paxman MacTaggart Lecture, *Edinburgh Television Festival* 25 August 2007

Social responsibility and the media

Mike Jempson *All-Party Social Responsibility Group, House of Commons* 12 January 2006

The Media: Public Interest and Common Good

Dr Rowan Williams *Guardian* 15 June 2005

Paxman answers the questions

Guardian 31 January 2005

Reuters Memorial Lecture

John Lloyd Media *Guardian* 22 October 2004

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BACKGROUNDERS

Media commentary...and commentary on the media

Hansard Society April 2005

What are newspapers for?

Alan Rusbridger *Hugo Young Lecture* 9 March 2005

A question of trust

Onora O'Neill *Reith Lectures, BBC Radio 4* 2002

Jeremy Paxman

British Film Institute Screen Online

Code of conduct

National Union of Journalists

BBC NewsWatch

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ORGANISATIONS

Ofcom

Press Complaints Commission



IN THE NEWS

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Will Alastair Campbell's diary divulge the truth about life at No10?

Independent 1 July 2007

BBC publish report on guarding impartiality in the 21st century

BBC 18 June 2007

Media 'like feral beast' - Blair

BBC News 12 June 2007

The Humphrys verdict on 'boring' Brown and Blair

The Times 2 September 2005

BBC dismisses Howard complaints

BBC News 30 August 2005

Archbishop delivers rigorous critique of news media

Ekklesia 16 June 2005

Archbishop attacks 'lethal' media

Guardian 16 June 2005

BBC defends 'adversarial' Paxman

BBC News 16 March 2005

Change shows a year after Hutton

BBC News 27 January 2005

Grade sets out purpose for news

BBC NewsWatch 25 January 2005

Institute to raise journalistic standards

Guardian 19 January 2005

Tories open fire on BBC over 'bias' by Paxman

Daily Telegraph 27 November 2004

Editor sacked over 'hoax' photos

BBC News 14 May 2004



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- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

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