Beyond the bullshit:
Studying the media's role in public knowledge

'One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit'. Thus began a disquisition by the analytical philosopher Professor Harry Frankfurt, first published almost twenty years ago. Frankfurt's piece clearly hit a nerve: when it was republished ten years later, the book was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for six months. Measuring bullshit would be an unpleasant endeavour, but it would be hard to deny that the bullshit today seems to be ever increasing.

In this paper, I want to set out a rationale and an agenda for research on a very traditional, and somewhat forgotten, topic in Media Studies: public knowledge. The key questions are these: What role do the media play in developing public understanding of social issues – and what role *should* they play? How are social issues defined and represented in the media, and interpreted by audiences? What opportunities and challenges are offered by new digital media and by the more commercialized 'knowledge economy' in this respect? And how might academic researchers, especially in the social sciences, use media to make a more effective contribution to public knowledge – and to cutting through the bullshit?

Why public knowledge?

Let's begin with some basic axioms of Media Studies. The media are the central institutions of the modern public sphere. They play a leading role in the social production and circulation of information, and the cultivation of public knowledge. The media help to define *how* we know, not just *what* we know. The constraints and possibilities of particular media, the conditions in which they are produced, and the ways in which they are circulated and sold, all contribute to setting the parameters of public understanding.

The advent of digital media – particularly 'social' media such as blogging, user-generated content, social networking, and so on – changes this situation in complex and ambivalent ways. These media enable a wider range of people to create their own content, communicate with audiences, and participate in public debate. Yet they also raise new issues about credibility and authority, and the ethics of public communication.

Perceptions of public knowledge play an especially important role in the making of policy. Arguably, politicians and policy-makers have become increasingly sensitive to expressions of 'public opinion', at least as these are articulated by the media, and by the public relations strategies of interest groups, campaigners, think tanks and individual opinion leaders. The making of public policy is thus increasingly subject to the vicissitudes of this contemporary 'marketplace of ideas'.

These issues are a growing concern for academic researchers, as we are increasingly urged to generate 'impact', and to communicate not just with our peers, but also with the wider community. While there is an established concern with the public communication of (natural) science, there has been less attention to these issues in relation to the social sciences. Yet in public debates about social issues, it may be

much harder to establish academic authority and to trust the reliability of evidence – not least because such issues often come close to people's everyday experience.

Modern universities are now developing a more proactive role in this respect, and seeking to exercise greater control of the means (and media) of public engagement. The move towards open access academic publishing and 'digital scholarship' also has exciting but challenging implications for the relationships between academics and the 'lay' public. Yet in addition to seeking impact, we also need to discover much more about what it involves and how it is achieved. We need to understand how the topics we address are mediated in the wider public sphere, and how this in turn impacts on people's understanding of them.

How do particular phenomena become 'issues' in the first place? Who has the power to define the terms of debate about them, and how do they do so? How do 'lay' people understand and participate in these debates? How do people *learn* about social issues through the media, and how might they do so more effectively? These are questions that have become more urgent, but also increasingly complex, with the advent of so-called social media.

Old questions

These questions take us back to some 'classic' perspectives and debates in the sociology of knowledge. These range from Foucault's work on discourse and epistemology, through Habermas's concepts of the public sphere and communicative rationality, to the challenges posed by Lyotard's postmodernist approach to 'language games'. The debate is also addressed by cultural historians such as Peter Burke, and at a more 'micro' level by social constructionists such as Jonathan Potter and Michael Billig.

Closer to home, there has been useful work on public knowledge in the field of media and communication studies, for instance by Peter Dahlgren and John Corner. Yet while several important studies were conducted in this field in the 1980s and early 1990s, there is a need to revisit and extend this work in light of contemporary changes, both in technology and in the economic and institutional context of the media industries.

Thus, there is a need here to analyse the changing professional practices of the contemporary media industries, especially as they relate to questions of public knowledge. How, for example, is 'expertise' claimed and established – and indeed contested – in the more heterogeneous and instantaneous media environment? How do journalists relate to their potential sources, in a context where media engagement has become more professionally managed? How are expressions of 'public opinion' solicited, represented and evaluated by those who seek to influence policy, and by the media themselves?

Changes are also apparent in the textual forms of contemporary media. Recent years have seen the emergence of new media genres, both in 'old' media (reality TV, makeover shows, 'docusoaps', 'shock jocks') and in new media (blogging and micro-blogging, citizen journalism, digital storytelling, 'serious games'), all of which create

different possibilities for the representation of social issues. Studies of the media's role in relation to public knowledge should clearly include the analysis of traditional forms such as news and current affairs, but they should also look to these new and emergent cultural forms.

These changes also have implications for media audiences or users. In some respects, the question of public knowledge can be seen as an issue of 'media literacy' – which has been a key concern in regulatory policy over the past decade in particular. In Ofcom's definition, media literacy is about how people 'access, understand and create' media communication. In relation to public knowledge, it is vital to understand how people critically evaluate media – for example, what they know about how media are produced, how they make judgments about the credibility and reliability of sources, how they assess verbal and visual evidence, and how they make connections between media representations and their own direct experience. Returning to the question of public knowledge will inevitably mean exploring the 'sense-making' processes of audiences – that is, how people actively select, evaluate and use media in light of their needs, experiences and existing knowledge.

From an educational perspective, these issues are essentially matters of *public pedagogy*: they are not only to do with *what* the media communicate, but also with *how* they do so – and with how people can use them as resources for learning. There is a need here to build connections with theories of learning, perhaps particularly with the emerging body of work in the field of informal learning; as well as with sociological studies of 'educational capital'.

Finally, there are two further approaches that are especially relevant here. The first of these is the *social constructionist approach to studying social problems*, as developed most recently in the work of US researchers such as Joel Best. This approach provides valuable tools for understanding not just how the agenda for public debate is set, but also how items on that agenda are defined and constructed (or 'framed'). It addresses how issues are identified within public arenas, who participates in this process, how they make truth claims, and how the framing of issues not only focuses attention but also limits the ways in which they can be interpreted. As such, this approach offers an important critical perspective on the relation between evidence, public debate and social policy.

The second approach here is that of *public engagement with science*. In this area, there has been a general move away from a 'deficit model' that contrasts objective understanding with the apparently irrational, distorted or ill-informed views of the general public. Older linear models – defined in terms of the transfer of information, or the diffusion, dissemination or popularisation of science – have been criticised as paternalistic, although it is acknowledged that they may still be relevant in some contexts, or in relation to some issues. There has been a new emphasis on dialogue, engagement and participation, among a public that is no longer seen as passive and ignorant – an approach that clearly connects with the notion of the 'active audience' in Media Studies. However, there has been relatively little attention here to public engagement with *social* science – an area in which the relationship between academic understandings and 'lay theories' may be particularly complex.

In the marketplace of ideas

A first priority is to understand the changing parameters and constraints of this 'marketplace of ideas'. Public knowledge of social issues is shaped by a range of intermediaries. Among the most influential of these are the individuals frequently termed the 'commentariat': they include pundits, columnists and commentators working in 'old' media (the press and television current affairs programmes), but also prolific participants in the world of social media (bloggers, online journalists, and the 'Twitterati'). With the rise of 24-hour television and digital media, the balance between reporting and commentary in the mainstream media has arguably shifted significantly towards the latter. Those who are seen as 'experts' and 'opinion leaders' – including academic 'celebrities' and public intellectuals – are increasingly called upon to interpret current events, and their commentaries are in turn the focus of further debate online. Meanwhile, influential commentators in the 'blogosphere' may have many hundreds of thousands, even millions, of 'followers'.

Recent governments have placed great emphasis on the need for 'evidence-based policy'. Yet policy-makers balance the available evidence against their perception of public opinion – or at least the ways in which public opinion is typically articulated by pressure groups and by influential sections of the media. Arguably, this process has become more complex and contested due to the proliferation of media outlets and the increasing importance of intermediaries (such as consultants and public relations strategists) employed to shape media coverage. In this environment, the relations between research evidence, public opinion, media coverage and policy-making are changing.

Thus, there is a need to explore how policy-makers commission, frame and use reviews of scientific evidence on particular issues; how public opinion is measured, by whom and for what purposes; and the role of NGOs, charities, lobby groups and influential media commentators in shaping the agenda for policy-making. A key factor here is the role of various interest groups and entrepreneurs in branding and promoting policy 'solutions' (the Third Way, Nudge, the Tipping Point…). These are all inherently *mediated* processes; and so there is need to consider the role of the media in shaping and reporting expressions of public opinion; and how researchers and policy-makers engage with and through the media when participating in public policy debate.

This situation is changing with the widespread availability of social media, but not necessarily in the straightforwardly democratic or 'empowering' ways their advocates tend to claim. The internet represents a means of media distribution that is potentially accessible to all; yet the removal of traditional intermediaries or gatekeepers (such as editors, broadcasters or publishers) and the anonymity of the medium can also undermine the grounds for trust. How do people make judgments about the credibility of the information they find online? How do they identify and assess different information sources? While there has been some useful work on this area in the US – especially in relation to health information and scientific issues (such as climate change) – there has been very little in the UK.

The need for 'digital literacy' is widely recognized by policy-makers and educators; yet this is often seen to be little more than a matter of instrumental skill. There is a

need to explore the criteria people use to assess the credibility of sources (including non-verbal features, links, forms of user feedback, and so on); how users seek for and select information, taking account of source credibility, message credibility and medium credibility; and the ways in which user-generated platforms (such as Wikipedia) seek to establish and improve credibility through collaboration and the development of 'community standards'.

Public knowledge and social issues

More concrete examples of research might focus on the mediation of particular social scientific issues or disciplines. Three examples can suffice.

The first is education itself. Over the past two decades, the education system has undergone a rapid sequence of far-reaching reforms. Changes in the curriculum, the assessment regime, the working conditions of teachers, and the funding and institutional structure of schools have all been explained and justified by recourse to broader arguments about the nature of learning and the fundamental aims of education. Yet it remains unclear how far these arguments reflect – or have indeed produced – broader ideological or attitudinal shifts within the population at large. The *mediation* of these debates has barely been addressed by educational researchers, yet it is surely a crucial aspect in the public understanding of education, and in the ways in which parents and children make use of educational services.

Thus, it would be useful to analyse the coverage of educational issues (broadly defined) in the mainstream media, not only in factual reporting but also in entertainment programming like *Jamie's Dream School*. It would also be important to look at the emergence of educational 'celebrities' such as the free school founders and media commentators Toby Young and Katharine Birbalsingh; the work of parenting groups and 'experts', from mumsnet to Sue Palmer, the author of *Toxic Childhood*; the popular circulation and influence of the work of educational 'gurus' such as Howard Gardner (under the last Labour government) and E.D. Hirsch (under the Coalition); and the ways in which 'solutions' to educational problems are branded and promoted ('emotional intelligence', 'personalisation', 'creativity'…). Research could usefully explore the media strategies of pressure groups and 'think tanks' in this area; the representation and use of research evidence, for example in the implementation of new policies in the teaching of reading; and the contribution of commercial interests, such as publishers, awarding bodies and other companies, to the ongoing public debate about education. It could also explore how these discourses are mobilized at the 'micro' level, for example in schools' publicity materials, in teachers' accounts of their own practice, and in parental decisions around secondary school choice.

A second area for consideration here is economics. My own research for the DCMS/DCSF enquiry on 'the impact of the commercial world on children's wellbeing' raised some challenging questions about young people's understanding of the economy. These questions are often quite narrowly framed as matters of 'financial literacy', but they also relate to people's understanding of broader economic forces. These issues are much more pertinent today in the wake of the ongoing financial crisis. While the media are full of gloomy predictions of economic

collapse, while politicians are keen to espouse arguments about the need for fairness and equality, and while bankers in particular have become hate figures in popular culture, it is not clear how far the general public understands or interprets economic processes. People may be well aware of the consequences of these developments in their own everyday lives – rising food and energy prices, cuts in public expenditure – but to what extent do they understand their causes? There is a need to analyse the explanations of macro-economic processes and business practices that are offered in the mainstream media, the ways in which they are interpreted by audiences, and how they feed into 'lay theories' of the economy.

A third area could be the analysis of popular psychology, which is a well-established and lucrative aspect of the media industries. From specialist magazines, newspaper advice columns and self-help books through to counselling websites and television makeover shows, discourses about personality, mental health and therapy are big business. Psychological 'experts' of varying credentials are routinely featured on reality TV and talk shows; and psychological 'celebrities' often carry on lucrative media enterprises alongside their clinical practice. Meanwhile, psychological ideas such as wellbeing and happiness increasingly feature in social policy-making; while popularized notions drawn from fields as diverse as neuroscience and humanistic psychotherapy are increasingly influential in professional practice in areas such as education and social welfare.

While these developments can be seen as symptomatic of the 'self-reflexivity' of late modern society, they are not necessarily always benign in their consequences. These popular or 'lay' understandings of psychology have rarely attracted much critical attention from academic or professional psychologists. Again, the focus needs to be specifically on the role of the media, as the primary means through which these forms of popular psychology are represented, practiced and disseminated. How and why do the media select particular individuals as psychological experts, how is their expertise is established and represented, and what theoretical assumptions are invoked here?

Conclusion

In laying out a research agenda in this way, there is obviously a danger of implying a kind of disinterested contemplation. My point, however, is that academics are involved in these processes, whether they like it or not. Some academics become active participants, of course – and social scientists probably have a less positive record in this respect than, say, historians or natural scientists. Others – and I have often been one – tend to step back from the fray, suspicious of the compromises of 'popularization' and preferring to circulate our critiques within our own safe, institutionalized domains. Yet as we are increasingly urged to maximize our impact, we need to pay closer attention to the role of the media as a way of achieving it. It's time to stop shouting about all the bullshit, and do something about it.

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