

Life and institutions in Britain

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The media

Spending a night with me, guarantees you celebrity"

(Robbie Williams)

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Life and institutions in Great Britain - The media

1. Introduction

“Spending a night with me, guarantees you celebrity”

Robbie Williams (taken from his latest album “Escapology”)

Why is this so? What is the reason that the media have so much influence on society? Is it true that news and media organizations are more powerful than the government, the police or even the queen?

What are the reasons for becoming famous and getting caught by “the public eye”?

These few questions related to the topic “media in Great Britain” already illustrate the many-sidedness of this subject. In order to understand the media structure in Great Britain and to answer the questions above, I would like to give a short but detailed survey of the different existing media types.

There are four important media types, which have a lot of influence on society. **Newspapers** and **television** are the essential sources of information, but also **radio** and - becoming more and more popular today - the **internet** are used to gain information.

2. Newspapers

One of the most important sources of information is the newspaper. Beside the TV newspapers are for most people still the only source of information in the wider world. This fact may be the reason why newspapers actually have so much influence on public opinion. Further we have to keep in mind that the British buy more newspapers than any other people in the world (except the Swedes and the Japanese). Because of this broad readership a complex press structure has developed, which isn't always easy to understand. So the aim of my survey is to make it more clear.

We can make a distinction between two kinds of national newspapers in Britain: the **quality-papers**, also called **broadsheets** and the **popular papers**, better known as **tabloids**.

The broadsheets - their name comes from the fact that they are printed on large paper - report national and international news in a very professionally deep way and are serious in tone. In broadsheets we find editorials which make comments on important issues and reflect the (in most cases political) view of the paper's editor. The main contents are politics, financial news, home news, foreign news, features (= articles) and sports news. But crosswords, comic-strips, advertisements and the weather forecast can also be found in quality papers.

The most well-known broadsheets are **The Times**, **The Daily Telegraph**, **The Guardian**, **The Independent** and **The Financial Times**. Each of these newspapers supports a certain political view and people usually buy a paper or papers which reflect their own political opinion.

Even more interesting are the tabloids. They have pages only half the size of the broadsheets and enormous headlines. The name of the tabloids comes from a word first used for pharmaceutical substances which were compressed into pills. That is what the tabloids do: compress the news. In popular papers news is reported in less depth and even the content is predictable. We can find many articles about sex, sports and famous people (like Robbie Williams)

in there. This kind of coverage is called **gossip**: the subject is rumours about the private lives of celebrities.

The tabloids concentrate on human-interest stories as well, which are articles about people and their lives and events that are unlikely to affect a lot of other people. In order to be the first in publishing it, popular papers often pay a lot of money for a human-interest story. This “phenomenon” is called **cheque-book journalism**.

Another indication of tabloid journalism is the insulting of people from foreign countries, especially from Germany.

The most important and widely-known tabloids are: **The Sun, The Mirror, The Express, The Daily Mail** and **The Daily Star**. The Sun is known world-wide for its page-three girls and its stories about scandals. It has been the best selling newspaper in Britain since the 1970s with about four million copies per day. There are many people who disapprove of the tabloids and call them the **gutter-press**, but there are even more people, who read them nevertheless.

This division into two types of press reflects a division in society of certain groups of people clamouring for different news and alternative ways of presenting it. So the tabloid press seems to be a product of our society, because people want this kind of news-presentation. The success of the gutter-press is dependent on the entertainment value they provide to the public. It is a fact that newspapers like The Times or The Guardian have taken on a far more tabloid appearance than ever, which is called “tabloidisation”. They have done this by using similar typefaces, bigger headlines, more pictures and by including fashion-pages, teenage sections, car reports etc.

Both quality papers and popular papers are printed and distributed on a national basis six days a week. Some are now printed in Brussels, Barcelona, Frankfurt and other big centres for the tourists and British, Irish etc. people working abroad.

On Sundays “Sunday papers” like **The Sunday Times, The Observer** or **The News of the World** are published, which can also be divided into quality and popular papers. The Sunday papers devote large sections to literature and the

arts (except the tabloids, of course) and supply quite different worlds of taste and interest. They have colour supplements and are more like magazines than newspapers. This tells us a lot about the function of “newspapers” on Sundays in British culture.

Beside these national papers there are a lot of regional newspapers, which are “evening” papers, that means they are published in about four editions between midday and 5 p.m.. They are semi-popular and mostly sold by elderly men or women standing in the streets or delivered to homes by “paperboys” or “papergirls”.

Local morning papers are not so important, there are just twenty regional morning papers left, whose combined circulation is much less than that of The Sun alone. They are politically neutral and report local news. Some local papers are weekly and mostly bought for the useful information in their adverts.

National weekly and periodical press is represented by magazines like **The Economist**, **Time** and **Newsweek**. Even The Times has been three weekly supplements, which are published and sold separately. Weekly or monthly magazines can be found for any of thousand special interests. Almost every activity has its own magazine, but especially women’s magazines sell millions of copies.

After reflecting so much about all kinds of newspapers, I will move on now and explain the second important media type: television.

3. Television

Almost the same as it was with newspapers, more than half of the population in Britain rely on TV as their main source of news. Since the 1970s 98 per cent of British households have had television sets to receive a minimum of four channels.

These channels are: **BBC 1**, **BBC 2**, **ITV** and **Channel 4**. While the BBC-channels are financed by the sale of TV licences, programmes and publications, the other channels are run by commercial companies. Especially commercial cable and satellite TV began to grow significantly in the early 1990s with the result that the two main broadcasting companies joined together as **British Sky Broadcasting** (or shorter: **Sky**).

But the most popular television and radio broadcasting organization in Britain is the BBC. It has been financed by the government since 1927 but free to choose the contents of its programmes. BBC 1 is the main television channel of the BBC, its programmes are mostly of general interest, for example light entertainment, news, sports, films and children's programmes.

BBC 2 shows more serious programmes like plays, concerts or documentaries. These reporting and documentary presentations are known world-wide as "high-standard-productions".

ITV (Independent Television) includes a couple of commercial television companies, which were founded in 1954 and broadcast on Channel 3 in Britain. The structure of ITV is complex, it is divided into ten regions, each of which has its own programmes and news. It has - unlike the BBC - advertising and is controlled by the **ITC** (Independent Television Commission). This organization was established in 1991 in order to control the commercial television channels and to take responsibility for licensing these channels. The status of the BBC wasn't changed with the setting up of this commission, but the effect was an increasing competition between broadcasters and producers. ITV broadcasts a great variety of subject matters like news, information or light entertainment and is also famous for its soap operas like

“Crossroads” and “Coronation Street”. Last named soap-opera is one of Britain’s most popular programmes, it started in 1960 and has been broadcast three times a week since 1989.

Apart from the commercial breaks, the content of ITV is very much like that of the BBC. It is the presentation of ITV that makes it identifiable - more mass appeal.

Channel 4 started broadcasting in 1982 as an independent company. It presents a more specialized range of programmes that are of interest to minority groups such as detailed news reports, documentaries and educational programmes. Channel 4 is also an important producer of British films.

In 1997 Channel 5 began its transmissions in Britain. This commercial television station shows mainly popular programmes like games, comedies and films.

Nowadays the variety of television programmes is even greater, because of the “digitalization” of TV. People in Britain can receive additional channels from Sky by paying for the service and using a small satellite dish or special cable connections. Most of these channels broadcast one particular type of programme and are called “Sky Sports” or “Sky Movies”. Some sports events can only be seen on Sky.

As we can see, television is opinion-forming in society because of its wide spread and great variety of programmes. So objectivity is of essential importance in television reporting and it seems to be getting lost more and more nowadays. But, fortunately, especially BBC news has always kept its reputation for its objectivity.

In my own opinion television is probably the most important single factor in the contest for the public’s favour between political parties, but also in the public perception of character and behaviour of famous people. If such a “star” is able to use this type of media (but also all other kinds of media) to her or his own benefit, it will create exactly that certain “image” she or he wants society

to have of her or him. Robbie Williams, for example, is a person, who “plays” with the media very well.

After discussing the two main types of media institutions in Britain, I would like to move on now and give a short overview of radio and internet, too.

4. Radio

Many people in Britain rely on the radio to hear the latest news. Around half of the British radio audience listens to the BBC, although there are independent commercial radio stations, too.

We can distinguish five national BBC radio channels: **Radio 1** plays rock and pop music, **Radio 2** broadcasts pop, comedy and entertainment programmes, **Radio 3** offers classical music and arts programmes, **Radio 4** popular news and current affairs programmes and finally **Radio 5 Live** has sports.

There are also some independent radio stations, which broadcast in competition with the BBC. Some of these stations are: **Classic FM**, which plays only classical music, **Virgin Radio** and **Talk Radio UK**.

Furthermore we should not forget that many people also listen to their local radio stations, which concentrate on local news, traffic reports and pop music. These are a more recent development.

It seems to me that radio has more of an entertainment value nowadays than creating public opinion. But nevertheless I could not imagine a “media structure” without radio.

5. Internet

The last type of media I would like to talk about is the internet, which is becoming more and more popular today. A lot of newspapers, for example, are available on the internet, too, which is very useful for checking the headlines, although most people prefer to read the printed version.

The biggest problem of the internet is its unstructured abundance of topics and pages. While the structures of the newspapers and television organizations are clear and mostly easy to grasp, it is almost impossible to give a clear view over the innumerable pages on the net. A good example supports my point of view: If you type "Robbie Williams" into a search engine like "google", you get about 527.000 hits!!! So it is up to you to divide the amount of information into useful and useless facts. Let me take Mr. Williams as an example again: on the internet there exist six main official and unofficial fanpages about him with news, lyrics, pictures, statements, way of life etc., which have their domains in four different countries (England, USA, Germany and France). If you took an even closer look, I bet you would find a lot more pages. So nothing is left out, every little drop of information can be found on these pages.

6. Summary

At the end of my thoughts about media, I would like to give a summary. As we have seen, the mass media in Britain influence society by giving or creating information and news. Besides that, the media are inevitably selective and partial and have some tendency to reflect political positions and certain values without presenting anything like a coherent view of the world. All kinds of TV and radio programmes or newspaper stories are mostly determined by a great variety of factors. These include bureaucratic organization as well as pressures from the state and from the private owners of media groups (e.g. Rupert Murdoch). My conclusion is that the media are one of the most powerful features of today's society and therefore a very important institution of the state.

The increasing pursuit of celebrity news should be a warning sign, because my introductory quotation from Robbie Williams seems to show the superficiality and triviality of some of the media in a dangerous light. But - and that is the positive side of the story - the audience of the mass media cannot be treated as passively accepting all media output. It is the public, who have the power to decide which kinds of information it wants and who have the power to stop matters like the celebrity press or paparazzi photographs. So it is **everyone of us** who is responsible for the things going on in the media.

7. Literature

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