

The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power

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The Contemporary Contexts of Hybridity

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Abstract and Keywords

Chapter 3 builds upon the themes of chapter 2 but goes beyond it to establish the contemporary context for the analyses of political communication that follow in chapters 4 to 9. This chapter sets the scene for these more detailed illustrations of the hybrid media system in Britain and the United States by focusing on the changing nature of audiences, shifting patterns of media use, the salient structural characteristics of broadcasting, newspaper, and online media, and the emergence of new hybrid forms of mediality.

Keywords: contexts, audiences, broadcasting, newspapers, online, media usage, mediality, hybridity, Britain, United States

In this chapter I move from the past to the present and establish the broad contours of media system hybridity in contemporary Britain and the United States. My aim here is to lay some contextual foundations for the more detailed analyses of the hybrid media system in flow, which comprise chapters 4 to 9. In this chapter I focus on four overarching themes: the nature of audiences, shifting patterns of media use, the structure of broadcasting, newspaper, and online media, and the rise of new hybrid forms of mediality. Though the sources of evidence are somewhat different, the chapter is, in many respects the latest installment of the ongoing history of media hybridity I traced in chapter 2.

I turn first to Britain, which is the context of my analysis of news making in chapter 4 and the discussion of sense making in media and political fields in

chapters 8 and 9. Britain also forms an important part of the context of my interpretation of WikiLeaks in chapter 7.

Britain

By the late 2000s, multi-channel digital television had reached more than 80 percent of British households and in several areas of the country, such as Scotland and the northwest of England, penetration rates were much higher¹ (U.K. Office for National Statistics, 2009: 4). Television news channels continue to grow in number, and a panoply of different news forms now exists in the broadcasting environment, from short bulletins and soft news content on the entertainment channels, to relatively detailed “serious” coverage on BBC Radio Four, to round-the-clock treatments on channels such as Sky News, the BBC News Channel, Euronews, and even the BBC Parliament channel. There is no shortage of political news in contemporary Britain but audiences are increasingly fragmented across the channels, the schedules, and the quasi-scheduled time-shifting environments of digital video recorders, the BBC’s multiplatform iPlayer, and mobile video applications. As part of an evolving process of adaptation and renewal, broadcasting has become ever more concerned with offering audiences customizable, personally tailored modes of consumption and interaction.

By any standards, the British public’s use of the internet has grown at a remarkable rate over the past two decades. About 73 percent of households now have access, up from 58 percent in 2003 ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2011](#)). Just as significantly, 96 percent (p.43) of all households that have the internet use a broadband connection ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009: 4](#)). The diversity of means by which individuals can access information online has also increased. The internet is no longer a computer-based medium. Mobile access has grown in popularity and is continuing to grow: by 2009, 20 percent of internet users owned a mobile smartphone (such as an Apple iPhone) or a mobile broadband device that they plug into their laptop computer ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009: 9](#)). Mobile phone adoption more generally has reached extraordinary levels in Britain: in 2008, there were 74 million mobile phone accounts for a population of 60 million (U.K. Office of Communications, 2008).

This new diversity of opportunities for internet access plays an important role in creating multi-tasking lifestyles in multi-connection households. Around a quarter of those with satellite or cable television use it to access the internet. About a third (32 percent) use a mobile device to access the internet while

in the home—a figure that trebled between 2005 and 2009, reflecting the popularity of wireless handheld devices with built-in web browsers, e-mail, messaging software, and applications provided by the major online social network providers. Hybrid consumption patterns are strongly emerging among some sections of the public. By the late 2000s, 71 percent of internet users reported “doing more than one activity while online, such as listening to music, watching TV, or using the telephone” ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009](#): 12, 36). The very recent shift toward tablet computing, with Apple’s iPad having sold 55 million units since its 2009 launch, has intensified these trends (Associated Press, 2012).

The most startling change since the mid-2000s comes in the form of mass participation in the creation of online content, as British media and the public alike have not escaped the global wave of web 2.0 and social media. It is easy to forget just how quickly this shift has come about. It has been fueled by the enormous growth of blogs, online social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, collaborative production sites such as Wikipedia, and news aggregators and discussion sites such as Digg, Reddit, Yahoo Buzz, and the BBC’s Have Your Say, to name but a few examples ([Chadwick, 2009](#)). By the late 2000s, almost half (49 percent) of British internet users maintained a profile on an online social network site, more than a fifth (22 percent) regularly updated a blog, and more than a quarter (27 percent) participated in online discussion. Older online communication forms such as instant messaging (64 percent of users) and e-mail (97 percent) are now quite simply ubiquitous in British society ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009](#): 21).

There are some signs that internet use is displacing time previously spent by the British public on other media, though typically the patterns are unclear and television news is retaining its dominance in key respects. In 2009, non-internet users spent an average of twenty-five hours per week watching terrestrial television, but internet users spent only fifteen hours per week. Equally significant are the different usage patterns that appear to be opening up between the internet and television. Thirty percent of those who use the internet perceive it to be their most important source of information—ahead of television (11 percent), newspapers (seven percent), and radio (six percent) ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009](#): 33). According to the Oxford Internet Survey of 2007, among internet users, levels of trust in the internet as a source of information were higher than for television and newspapers ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2007](#)). And yet the flagship British **(p.44)** television news shows remain remarkably powerful. Following a period of decline in the 1990s, between 2004 and 2009 the scheduled news bulletins on the major

terrestrial channels—BBC1, ITV, Channel 4, and Channel Five—lost only 200,000 viewers. Younger people are much less likely to watch television news, raising the question of whether these age groups will eventually adopt the habits of their parents, but overall there has been no dramatic systemic decline in the audiences for British television news since the early 2000s (U.K. Office of Communications, 2010). Television has adapted. We also need to unpick those data from 2007 about levels of trust in the internet as a source of information, because in Britain the highly trusted public service media organization, the BBC, has, over the last fifteen years built its own gigantic online presence.

It does seem clear, however, that television's traditional monopoly on news is loosening, not only because online news sites are more prepared to take risks by publishing stories without the standards of verification usually required of professional journalists, but also because the horizontal nature of social media communication now means it is much more likely that news will spread across interpersonal networks before official press releases are issued. Some big political news stories now break first online and are picked up by television and print journalists who obsessively follow their e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, and blog feeds in the hunt for new leads. I cover these dynamics in much greater detail later in this book.

At the same time, however, major British television and newspaper journalists like the BBC's Political Editor Nick Robinson and ITV's Business Editor Laura Kuennsberg have adapted and now often "scoop" themselves by releasing their own stories online long before they officially file their reports or go into the newsroom to record a broadcast package for the evening news. And it must also be noted that the large, dedicated news organizations, particularly the BBC, share vast amounts of content internally across their web and television divisions. This provides them with an ongoing structural advantage when it comes to breaking news. While British newspapers and commercial broadcasters are certainly under pressure, BBC broadcasting is in a stronger position, largely as a result of the publicly funded license fee. Despite complaints of unfair competition, the BBC continues to build a sophisticated web presence which, by 2011, was attracting more than forty million monthly unique visitors (Shearman, 2011). It has adopted many of the features used by other news organizations, such as stories with comments, message boards, and chat rooms, and it also integrates citizen-generated video into its news narratives, especially during exceptional events: good examples include the London underground bombings of 2005 and the G20 protests of 2009. The BBC also has the

hugely successful iPlayer, which runs on computers, mobile phones, and tablet devices, but is increasingly integrated into new televisions, satellite and cable television set-top boxes, gaming devices such as Microsoft's Xbox and Nintendo's Wii, not to mention a whole host of devices like the Slingbox or Apple TV that enable users to send streamed video wirelessly from their computers or smartphones to their television screens.

Television therefore shows signs of resilience and of the successful creation of reserved domains of power. The story is more complex for British print media. Nowhere have the pressures of the changing media system been more strongly felt than in the British newspaper industry. Declining print edition circulations, increasing online readerships, competition from free papers and online news providers and blogs, shrinking and more thinly spread advertising revenues, and the economic recession of the late (p.45) 2000s have all taken their toll on traditional British newspapers. And yet, even here there is an important story of adaptation and continuing power.

Like their American counterparts, for whom the pressures are eerily similar, British print media are in the middle of a painful transition toward new models of organization, production, and distribution. Part of this story is now familiar. Readership of print editions across all newspaper sectors has been in decline for several decades due to competition from television. But the internet accelerated this trend and introduced new forces. As in America, British newspapers' initial reaction to the internet in the 1990s was to ignore it in the hope that it might prove to be a fad. This was soon followed by a strategy of placing the content of the printed version of a paper onto a website in the hope of attracting sufficient "eyeballs" to generate advertising revenue. Some papers, such as the *Financial Times*, experimented early on with subscription models, only to scale these back due to a lack of subscribers and the lure of the advertising model when times were good during the economic boom of the mid-2000s. When times got hard during the advertising recession of the late 2000s, they tried again with the pay-per-view model. Many local and regional papers either lacked the resources to develop their own websites or stayed out of the game entirely for fear that they would cannibalize their print editions. The circulations of British local and regional printed newspapers fell by almost 40 percent between 1989 and 2009 (U.K. Office of Fair Trading, 2009: 12).

It now seems clear that the pay-per-view model can be made to work online where an outlet has a distinctive niche, as is the case with the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. By April 2012, almost half (47 percent)

of the *Financial Times's* paying readers subscribed to its digital editions ([Financial Times, 2012](#)). It remains to be seen whether more general news outlets can also make this model work. In June 2010, two of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation's online news sites, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times*, were placed behind a "paywall." By January 2012, the *Times* had 119,255 digital subscribers, of whom roughly half were iPad users, and a print circulation of 405,113. However, print circulation of the paper has also declined steeply since the digital subscription model began. For example, it fell by 24,441, or 5.7 percent, during just a five-month period from September 2011 to January 2012 ([O'Carroll, 2012](#)). The other national newspapers have experimented with paid models, but none has chosen to follow the Murdoch press. Even the *Daily Mail*, whose online offerings have soared in popularity both in Britain and abroad over the last few years to reach more than fifty million monthly visitors by 2012, remains wedded to its print edition and its website advertising-and-eyeballs model, not least because the web edition only generates 2.6 percent of the *Mail's* total revenue ([Economist, 2012](#)).

Google now dominates the online advertising market, but online the revenue per reader is substantially smaller than for traditional printed classified advertising. Ceding in-house control over advertising mechanisms to an external company (Google) with a near-monopoly in its market is also unattractive for newspaper owners and editors. At the regional and local levels, where 80 percent of papers' income derives from advertising, the press have long relied upon classified ads to sustain themselves, but revenues from these have almost halved since the late-1990s, due to competition from online outlets such as eBay and Craigslist ([U.K. Office of Fair Trading, 2009](#): 10).

There are signs, however, that advertising-and-eyeballs may soon start to pay off. By the mid-2000s, spending on internet advertising as a whole had eclipsed spending **(p.46)** on print advertising. By 2011 it had also eclipsed spending on television advertising ([Sweney, 2011](#)). News consumption habits among the British are also shifting. In 2007, the number of internet users who reported that they read a "newspaper or news service" online stood at 30 percent. In the space of just two years, this number almost doubled, to reach 58 percent ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009](#): 32). More generally, by 2009 75 percent of internet users reported reading news online, though this included non-newspaper sources such as blogs ([Oxford Internet Survey, 2009](#): 20). Most strikingly, the growth in newspapers' online editions contrasts starkly with the decline of their printed editions. According

to data from the UK Office of Fair Trading, from 1987 to 2007, annual sales of national newspapers declined by roughly a third. Between 1998 and 2007 sales fell quite sharply for the print editions of all the national papers except the *Daily Star* and the *Daily Mail* (U.K. Office of Fair Trading 2008). Yet during the 2000s the websites of all of the national newspapers saw massive growth, with the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* more than doubling their monthly unique users in just a two-year period between 2008 and 2010 and the *Guardian* showing strong growth in its online readership (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2010). Now, about one-fifth of the *Guardian's* revenue comes from its online news and two-thirds of its approximately thirty-two million monthly visitors are from outside Britain, with one-third living in America. Many newspapers are adapting and are now beginning to consolidate their roles as some of the most powerful players in online news (Economist, 2012).

An example of the enduring power of the traditional newspapers but also of how this power is refracted through the prism of the hybrid media system is the furor over British MPs' expenses in 2009—arguably the Westminster Parliament's most serious crisis since the emergence of British democracy. Huge quantities of data on MPs' expenses claims were leaked from Parliament in digitized form on optical discs. The *Daily Telegraph* took the initiative, with its decision to purchase the discs for £150,000 and to run, in print and online, an extended series of revelations about MPs' fraudulent expenses claims, spanning almost three weeks in May 2009 (BBC News Online, 2012). The newspaper employed a team of researchers who took a total of ten days to sift through the data and extract the most damaging documents. The paper also carefully staged each day's new releases to cause the maximum impact on other media. Frequent television appearances and blog posts by the paper's political columnist, Benedict Brogan, were a key part of this. Broadcast news and political blogs engaged in a sustained feeding frenzy as day after day MPs' expenses were the top story across all news outlets. This was an example of "old-fashioned" and well-resourced investigative journalism, but with a difference: the hybrid media system accelerated and amplified the news and distributed the information across all platforms. As the *Telegraph* released information online and in printed form, other news organizations were able to pick up the new revelations and run their own stories. And, in a final twist, some weeks later, when Parliament officially released what amounted to 458,000 pages of data, the *Guardian* symbolically thumbed its nose at the *Telegraph* by starting its own "crowdsourcing" campaign to publish yet more revelations. In a response to Parliament's censoring of the files, the *Guardian* published the entire database on its website and invited ordinary readers

to identify, log, and discuss the MPs' expenses claims. By November 2009, its readers had reviewed 225,000 pages ([Guardian, 2009](#)). So in addition to revealing the ongoing influence of older media logics, this episode also revealed the growing importance of the internet, not just as a channel for the communication of information, but also as a mechanism of **(p.47)** organization and networked collective action in the creation of news. This is one of the key aspects of media system hybridity I explore throughout the rest of this book.

The older British news organizations have also responded to the threat of blogs and social media by appropriating internet genres as a way of generating audience loyalty. A key development is online social interaction. Despite early resistance during the 1990s and 2000s, during the last half decade interactive commenting spaces have flourished in online news. Space for reader participation is now less tightly restricted and reader's views are much more visible across all online news platforms. All of the major British news sites now have well-established interactive features, such as op-ed columns with open commenting, message boards, and blogs. The major newspapers' and the BBC's message boards receive hundreds of thousands of comments per month. Readers are also now encouraged, and sometimes paid, to submit video footage and other user-generated material to news sites. Twitter, Facebook, and Flickr are important trawling grounds for professional journalists looking to source pictures and video. National news organizations are also attempting to position themselves as online social networking hubs, where, in addition to reporting and debating political developments, a reader can post pictures, socialize, or even set up a date. In 2010, the websites of the *Daily Express*, the *Star*, and the *Daily Telegraph* began allowing their readers to set up their own blogs. The adaptation of news organizations to the digital media environment is creating new opportunities for citizens to engage in political debate and express their opinions in new environments like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, but these spaces are also now occupied by and in some cases directly provided by older media actors.

This is not to say that alternative online news sites do not attract significant audiences or exercise meaningful power. Some high profile British blogs attract a relatively large readership. For example, Paul Staines's Guido Fawkes blog attracts around 350,000 unique visitors per month and regularly averages 100,000 daily page views. In 2008, Staines had a 2.3 percent share of overall blog visits in Britain and another Conservative blogger, Iain Dale, had a 1.9 percent share. Though these are small audiences when

compared with those for blogs at the BBC and the *Guardian*, which had a combined 33 percent share over the same period, things are surprisingly finely balanced. If we set aside the BBC and *Guardian* blogs, alternative online news looks remarkably competitive, because Dale and Guido Fawkes have never been too far behind the mainstream newspaper blogs of the *Times* and the *Telegraph* (Goad, 2008).

A further factor here is that cost-cutting has contributed to the undermining of the authority of professional broadcast and newspaper journalism. Creating timely, relevant, and challenging news is an expensive business, especially if a story involves an investigative element. However, the revenues to support this kind of activity have been falling for several years. Almost all commercial news organizations and the BBC have seen deep cuts and radical restructuring of staff and budgets (Davies, 2008). Writers and editors in what were once powerhouses of in-depth reporting and commentary, such as the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times*, now sit side-by-side with upstart individual or group blogs, most of which have a keen awareness of niche interests and very short news cycles. The top political bloggers in Britain regularly produce articles that are indistinguishable from those published in the op-ed sections of newspapers. Bloggers have low overheads and some have large readerships, solid advertising revenues, and other sources of income that they derive from their role in the hybrid media system, (p.48) such as appearance and speaking fees. Freed from the bureaucracy of the professional newsroom, some bloggers are also able to conduct background investigations and move among political and media elites, as we shall see at various points throughout this book. One example is Paul Staines, whose long-running series of exposés about former Labour government minister Peter Hain in 2008 culminated in damaging revelations about the origins of donations to Hain's campaign fund for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party. These were partly instrumental in Hain's decision to resign his ministerial post and this was widely reported as the first victory of the British "blogosphere."

There are limitations, however, to interpreting episodes like this solely as the result of the heroic power of online media. During the spring of 2009, the leak to Staines of an e-mail exchange between Gordon Brown's special advisor Damian McBride and former Blair adviser turned Labour blogger Derek Draper shed an unflattering light on Downing Street's approach to media management. "Smeargate," as it became known, revealed a plan by McBride to establish a supposedly independent website called Red Rag that would contain personalized attacks on leading Conservative politicians and

their families. The story was shaped by the interaction of older and newer media logics. It involved a right-wing blogger, (Staines) whose website, Guido Fawkes, emulates classic British tabloid journalism, with its mix of innuendo, gossip, and rumor. But Staines's "scoop" was dependent upon the support of two traditional British newspapers, for Staines did not publish the contents of the Draper-McBride e-mails on his blog but instead handed them to journalists at the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times*, who duly broke the stories and shared the credit.

An often-rehearsed criticism of bloggers is that they are "amateurs" who lack the professionalism and ethical standards of trained journalists (see for example Keen, 2007). Bloggers have been accused of being less discerning in what they publish and as likely to disseminate unsubstantiated political gossip as much as genuine political news. However, some of the popular British bloggers have now moved toward hybrid, semi-professional models of organization along the lines pioneered by the *Huffington Post* in the United States (discussed below), or they have been co-opted in the service of professional journalism. In 2011, successful Conservative blogger Iain Dale set up a "current affairs mega blog" which has a group of almost seventy writers. And in 2012, Paul Staines started writing columns for the print edition of the established newspaper, the *Daily Star*.

Despite all of these developments online, older news media organizations continue to play the pivotal roles in British politics. The media professionals at the heart of these organizations have their reserved domains of power. As we shall see in chapters 8 and 9, they remain deeply embedded in the routines and insider networks of Westminster, Whitehall, and the major metropolitan centers. They interact with politicians and senior civil servants on a daily basis in the Westminster lobby system, which, by its very nature has an exclusive membership—one that does not include bloggers. Politicians still largely stage their media interventions to coincide with the rhythms of the broadcasting and newspaper newsrooms, which remain important routes to large audiences and maximum publicity. Older media organizations have the collective financial and organizational resources to outscop exclusively online upstarts, and to leapfrog newer media outlets with the launch of expensive new initiatives such as online television delivery platforms like the iPlayer and ever more elaborate web environments that *combine* (p.49) editorial authority *and* popular participation. As chapters 8 and 9 will reveal more fully, the patterns of sense making among political staff, journalists, and activists suggest that in this hybrid system older media logics increasingly operate in relations of interdependence with newer media

logics: professional news organizations increasingly capitalize on newer media as a resource, tapping into the viral circulation of online content and weaving it into their news genres and production techniques, while also regularly engaging and interacting with newer media actors.

The United States

Similar hybrid forces now shape the media system of the contemporary United States, which forms the context of my interpretation of election campaigning in chapters 5 and 6, and of my discussion of WikiLeaks and news making in chapter 7.

To get things underway, consider Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini's powerfully concise summary of the current situation in America, which they gleaned from data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Media Dynamics Inc., and the Pew Research Center Internet and American Life Project. It is worth quoting at length:

To list the developments in communications that have occurred over the past twenty-five years is to be reminded of how radically different the media environment of the early twenty-first century is from what preceded it. For example, in 1982, as Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder were doing the research for their seminal work on the agenda-setting power of television news, *News That Matters*, fewer than 2 million personal computers were sold in the United States; the average home received approximately ten television channels; only 21 percent of American homes had a VCR; and the internet and mobile phones were, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent. By the late 2000s, annual U.S. computer sales had grown to 250 million, more than three-quarters of U.S. households had at least one personal computer, the average number of channels received had increased to more than 130, greater than 90 percent of homes had VCRs and/or DVD players, more than three-quarters of U.S. households had an internet connection (and more than 50 percent had high-speed connections), the number of websites increased from about 100 (in 1993) to more than 160 million, more than three-quarters of adult Americans had a cell phone or PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), and nearly one-third of households had a digital video recorder (DVR) such as TiVo.

On any given day in December 2009, more than seven of every ten adult Americans went online. And what do people do when they go online?...[Consider] the extensive and diverse range of activities engaged in by sizable percentages of people who use the internet, ranging from sending or reading e-mail (90 percent), to seeking directions (86 percent), looking for medical information (80 percent), buying a product (75 percent), seeking news (72 percent), visiting a government website (66 percent), watching a video (62 percent), seeking out political information (60 percent), social networking (47 percent), reading a blog (39 percent), playing online games (p.50) (35 percent), and donating to a charitable cause (19 percent)....[Consider] the generally still small but collectively revealing percentages of “wired” adults who act as information producers by sending e-mails (90 percent), sending instant messages (39 percent), uploading photos (37 percent), sending text messages (35 percent), rating a product (31 percent), tagging online content (28 percent), sharing files (27 percent), posting comments to a newsgroup or blog (22 percent), participating in a chat-room discussion (22 percent), sharing something online that they created (21 percent), creating content specifically for the internet (19 percent), creating their own web pages (14 percent), working on someone else’s webpage (13 percent), creating their own blogs (12 percent), remixing existing online material (11 percent), and/or creating an online avatar (6 percent) ([Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011](#): 77, 84-85).

These developments have both shaped and are shaped by shifting patterns of media use. American television audiences have fragmented over the last three decades. Contrast broadcast television’s heyday—the mid-1960s era of 6.8 stations per household and duplicate programming ([Prior, 2007](#))—with the early twenty-first century, when 85 percent of American households face a bewildering yet empowering choice of several hundred cable television channels, and when about 78 percent of the public can access vast swathes of online content ([International Telecommunication Union, 2011](#)). Americans are continuing their love affair with television, but they are increasingly switching their attention from just a few general channels to a broad range of channels and platforms that cater to niche interests. Advertisers and program makers have responded to this by creating ever more differentiated content. In 2009, the average number of television channels watched per

week in the United States was 16, with just 2.2 hours per viewer devoted to each channel. From the early 1980s to the early 2000s the big three broadcast networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—lost around a third of their audience share. When it comes to television news, cable national news audiences overtook nightly network news in the mid-2000s. Local television news is also under threat as a result of the recent declines in advertising income. Network news retains its dominance during important events such as elections and recent disasters like the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, though even here the growth of cable has been very strong: the cable audience for election night in November 2008 was 27.2 million, close to the 32.9 million for the networks. News programming has changed over the last decade, too, as greater competition and cost-cutting have diminished the amount of investigative and basic journalism while increasing the quantity of talk shows driven by opinionated “celebrity” news anchors. At the same time, there has been an insurgence of alternative sources of news, such as late-night comedy, reality shows, socially engaged television drama, cinema, and music, which blur the boundaries between news and entertainment and often engage and educate viewers in politically relevant ways. All of these trends are stronger among younger segments of the population, but as the young age, they carry these habits forward through the life course (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011: 78–79, 82).

At the same time, however, we need to exercise some balance when interpreting these trends. Audiences may be more fragmented and the range of media much greater, but television is still hugely dominant for the American public. In fact, while Americans are now consuming more media than ever before, they are also watching more television (p.51) than at any point in the nation’s history. Measuring these things can be like walking through a minefield, but according to respected industry research company Nielsen, in 2011 television was still six times more popular than the internet. By then, around 289 million Americans were watching an average of 159 hours per month of television, compared with a total of 191 million who were using the internet on a computer for an average of 26 hours per month (Nielsen, 2011a).

There are, however, interesting trends in the area of video. By 2011, around 142 million Americans were watching video on the internet for an average of five hours per month, while 29 million were watching video on a mobile phone for an average of four hours per month (Nielsen, 2011a). These figures may be small when compared with those for traditional television, but they are still significant, and they grew substantially during the late 2000s:

between 2008 and 2011 time spent watching video on the internet using a computer grew by 80 percent, while time spent watching video on a mobile phone grew by 20 percent. Growth in television time-shifting through the use of DVRs like TiVo was also significant for the American public during the late 2000s: between 2008 and 2011 this practice increased by 66 percent (Nielsen, 2011b). As early as 2009 Nielsen found that each month around 60 percent of television viewers were also using the internet while watching television (Nielsen, 2010). As in Britain (and elsewhere), there are also newer set-top box technologies that hybridize television, film, music, gaming, and internet video, such as the Apple TV and the Boxee Box. There is also some evidence that streaming television online is beginning to have a negative impact on cable television subscriptions (Nielsen, 2012). As we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, online video is changing some of the power structures of U.S. presidential campaigns, but in ways that are far from obvious, not least because online video now often works interdependently with television.

A sense of balance is also required when we consider patterns of political news use, particularly during U.S. presidential campaigns. By the presidential election of 2008, there had been significant shifts in this field. That year, 56 percent of citizens reported that they had received some campaign news online—an increase of 15 percent on 2004, and 26 percent on 2000. There were also steep rises in the numbers of people reporting the internet as their “main source of campaign news” in 2008. Back in 2000, this stood at just 11 percent. In 2004, it had risen to 21 percent. By 2008, it had reached 36 percent (this was higher than for newspapers, which in 2008 stood at 33 percent). If we break these numbers down by age, the results are even more startling. Among the under-30s, 58 percent stated in 2008 that the internet was their main source of campaign news, compared with 60 percent who named television. In other words, among the young, the internet was just as important as television for following the 2008 campaign (Pew Research Center, 2008a).

These trends are undoubtedly significant and some scholars, including Philip N. Howard and I, have discussed the rise of digital distribution and the growing group of political “omnivores” who consume news across a wide range of platforms (Howard & Chadwick, 2009). The growing importance of a range of secondary media for political information has been an established trend since the late 1990s (Massanari & Howard, 2011). But let us unpack these U.S. data a little, as a means of exploring the complex interactions between older and newer media logics.

When faced with findings that reveal a “rise” in the consumption of campaign news “online” and a “decline” in the consumption of campaign news in “print,” we need to (p.52) consider just how much online campaign information actually originates with newspaper sources. By 2008 all significant American newspapers and, indeed, broadcasting companies, had ceased to rely solely upon print and broadcast distribution and had moved into a variety of online distribution models. Campaign news that originates with “newspaper,” “radio,” and “television” companies now also spreads across the internet via at least four principal mechanisms: the organizations’ own websites; their formal presences on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and other social media sites; the news syndication sections of the major websites, such as Google News, MSN, and Yahoo; and the gigantic video and audio content hub that is YouTube. Given the adaptation to the internet among newspapers and broadcasters and the amount of print and broadcast news that is now repurposed for online consumption, it is very difficult to identify the true significance of these declines in audience numbers for “newspapers” and “television.” The 2008 Pew surveys do nevertheless provide some interesting clues.

As Table 3.1 reveals, the websites of America’s traditionally important broadcast and print news organizations like CNN, Fox, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* feature prominently among the top websites for campaign news. These sources are joined in the table by newer media players—the semi-professional blogs such as the *Drudge Report* and the *Huffington Post* had established large audiences by 2008, just like their British counterparts I discussed above. And yet, chief among the newer media are Yahoo, MSN, Microsoft, and AOL. These are portals and news aggregators that mostly repurpose the content of the big news brands (like CNN and the *New York Times*) whose own websites already feature among the most popular sources of news. In other words, television and newspapers, and their audiences, are now well and truly online, and in a variety of forms. This should caution against simple narratives about the decline of older news media.

The rise of the internet as a source of campaign information is genuinely significant; nobody could deny that. But just as significant is the fact that television has not declined: it is still the most important campaign medium for two-thirds of American voters. Even 60 percent of the under-30s still cited it as their main source of news in the 2008 campaign. And, while those citing television as their main source of campaign news fell overall from 76 percent in 2004 to 68 percent in 2008, this is best seen as fluctuation around

a solid base, because in 1996 the number for television was 72 percent and in 2000 it was 70 percent. A similar trend can also be observed for radio ([Pew Research Center, 2008a](#)).

Of course, we also need to consider the relative importance of different media during campaigns. The pattern here is somewhat clearer, with television emerging as relatively strong and printed news as relatively weak. While, as I have argued, we need to bear in mind that many newspapers have maintained their power by remediating print content for online distribution, in 2008 purely print media continued their long-running decline, and this was particularly the case among younger voters. Television and the internet were the most important media overall for gaining information about the campaign. Because Pew often ask respondents to list their two main sources of campaign information, they captured this new duopoly. Television and the internet are prospering, but the outlook for newsprint is bleaker.

Television’s remarkable endurance is also reinforced by emerging patterns of online news consumption. Among online media, reading blogs and visiting candidate websites **(p.53)**

Table 3.1 Top Websites for U.S. Presidential Campaign News in 2008 (percentages)

CNN	27
Yahoo	17
MSNBC/NBC	13
Candidate websites	13
Fox	11
MSN/Microsoft	9
Google	7
New York Times	6
Local newspaper/TV/Radio	5
AOL	5
Other conservative blogs/sites	5
Political parties/organizations	4
Drudge Report	4
Polling sites and aggregators	3

Washington Post	3
YouTube	2
Huffington Post	2
Other liberal blogs/sites	2
BBC	2
ABC	2
Other blogs	2
Politico	2

Notes: responses from those voters who stated that they got campaign news online. Respondents could list up to three responses.

Source: ([Pew Research Center, 2008a](#)).

were quite popular in the 2008 campaign. Roughly a quarter of the electorate consumed campaign information in this way. But watching videos was by far the most popular form of online activity: 39 percent of voters reported having watched a campaign-related online video. The age divisions were again pronounced: 65 percent of voters under thirty years old watched online video but this dropped to 38 percent for voters aged between thirty and sixty-four, though 38 percent of voters in this age group is still a huge number of people. Furthermore, using Pew data, Jeff Gulati reports that 28 percent of all voters viewed a candidate's speech online, 27 percent watched an interview, 23 percent saw at least one candidate debate, and 21 percent viewed at least one advertisement ([Gulati, 2010](#)). While there was plenty of content from speeches, interviews, debates, and advertisements that appeared only online in 2008, most of these important campaign events were first mediated by television, before being remediated by online media.

(p.54) In other words, the basic context of the contemporary American presidential campaign is that publics voraciously consume online video, but a large amount of that video does not actually originate online. So here we see two trends that are very similar to what we saw in the British context: first, older media in general have adapted and are now powerful players in online news; and second, American citizens increasingly use digital media to engage with campaign content that has originated in some way with television. As new internet video platforms like Hulu and the iTunes Store continue to expand, these trends are likely to continue. And, as chapters 6 and 7 reveal, if we switch the analytical focus away from opinion surveys and

toward a consideration of the actual interactions among campaigns, media, and publics, things look even more hybridized.

Since the turn of the century, the growth of blogging and user-generated content of all kinds, spanning activities such as social movement activism, election campaigning, and governance has been even more remarkable in America than it has in Britain. But again, as in Britain, matters are often more complex than they first appear. U.S. broadcast and newspaper media are working through a period of adaptation and change as they capitalize on the internet for their own purposes in sourcing, assembling, and distributing news. Richard Davis's case studies of the interactions among professional journalists, campaign staff, and elite bloggers illuminate the opportunities but also the constraints experienced by all of these groups (R. Davis, 2009). Marcus Messner and Marcia DiStaso's (2008) analysis of the content of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the 120 most popular U.S. blogs finds evidence of "intermedia agenda setting": in other words, bloggers source from newspapers and journalists source from bloggers. The celebrated cases of blogger power in the United States, such as, for example, the exposure of Senator Trent Lott's controversial remarks at a political dinner in 2003 that prevented him from becoming Senate Majority Leader, are best interpreted as the outcome of conflict, competition, and interdependence among bloggers and elite broadcast and newspaper journalists (Drezner & Farrell, 2008).

It is also the case that the U.S. blogosphere has changed in important ways since the first waves of excitement during the mid-2000s. While blogging continues to be very popular, a great deal of online content production that in the mid-2000s would have found expression in blogging now appears on social networking sites, particularly Facebook, which at the time of writing in mid-2012 is used by more than 155 million Americans, or 50 percent of the entire U.S. population (Socialbakers, 2012).

At the same time, some of the successful U.S. bloggers have become semi-professionalized. They act as consultants to campaigns, interest groups, government agencies, and traditional media. The blog and other interactive internet genres are no longer the radical departure they once were; they have been appropriated by all elite sectors of public communication in the United States, from politicians and agency officials to professional journalists to television and radio presenters. Moving in the direction of something like a model of a professional news organization, there are group blogs like the *Huffington Post*. Founded in 2005 by Arianna Huffington, a former columnist,

California gubernatorial candidate, and wife of a U.S. Congressman, the *Post* soon attracted venture capital funding and evolved into a hybrid of group blog and professional news organization (for Huffington's vision see [Huffington, 2007](#)). It combined articles from well-known public figures with commentary pieces by academics and even investigative pieces. It enjoyed the low overheads that derive from online-only (p.55) publication, not to mention an army of several hundred unpaid volunteer writers. By the time it was acquired by AOL in 2011 for \$315 million, the *Post*, with more monthly visitors than the *New York Times* website ([Economist, 2012](#)), was a world away from the cliché of the plucky independent blog running on a shoestring budget.

New digital network repertoires of collective action have also now proliferated across the American political landscape. The Wisconsin labor protests and Occupy sit-ins of 2011 and 2012 were the latest important manifestations of the networked activism that began in earnest during the late 1990s ([Bennett, 2003](#); [Bimber, 2003](#); [Castells, 2004](#); [Chadwick, 2006](#): 114–143; 2007). Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg have shown how the Occupy movement scaled from local to national and then to transnational with great speed via the sharing of collective action memes (2012). However, Occupy also sought to reconfigure the power of mediation by professional media. Borrowing from the repertoires of the early 2011 Egyptian pro-democracy rebellion centered on Cairo's Tahrir Square, Occupy activists hybridized real-space physical presence with their own instantaneous social media resources and publishing channels—flows of information that they knew would be monitored and reassembled by professional journalists eager to create authentic representations of their protest camps.

It is also important to note that these digital network repertoires are no longer the preserve of movement activism. They have now also been seized upon by television figures in order to raise profiles and promote both conservative and liberal agendas. This is an area where there are some important differences between the U.S. and Britain, because in Britain the public service broadcasting model constrains editorializing in broadcast news. In America, where the constraints are weaker, there have been some interesting recent interactions between broadcasting and the internet in this field. In August 2010 controversial conservative radio and Fox News host Glenn Beck organized a one-hundred-thousand-person "Restoring Honor" rally on the National Mall in Washington DC. Beck was able to tap into the horizontal online networks established by the libertarian Republican Tea Party movement, whose supporters turned out in large numbers, but

the event also revolved around Beck's reputation as a radio and television presenter. A few months later, in response to a suggestion by Joe Laughlin, an ordinary user of the news aggregator site Reddit, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert mobilized an estimated two hundred thousand people from among networks of liberal activists to participate in what they jokily termed a "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," again on the National Mall. The idea of using the rally to raise donations for DonorsChoose, a educational charity website, also came from Joe Laughlin and his Reddit comrades (Adams, 2010). Although largely satirical in its approach, Jon Stewart stated in public on several occasions that his aim was to draw attention to the lack of reasoned debate in the American news media and the influence of partisan extremism on public discourse (Agence France-Press, 2010).

Hybrid Mediality

These processes of hybridization in Britain and the United States stretch beyond the simple availability of greater numbers of devices and media channels. Professional media producers can now more easily manipulate media resources, but citizen "producers," to use Axel Bruns' formulation (2008), increasingly play their part. And the range of media (p.56) resources has expanded as political actors and newspaper and broadcast journalists have also adopted media practices associated with the internet. As the internet diffused in the 1990s, its modalities, genres, and interfaces influenced other media. This process was particularly evident in the field of television news, which has come to rely on sophisticated visual techniques that are employed by editors in order to leaven "hard" news for a general audience, such as digital animation, montage, overlay, and data visualization. The broadcasting of all live events now rests upon a whole host of practices that seek to deliberately (and some would say artificially) construct a sense of the real-time (Auslander, 2008: 15-22). These include ever-changing news tickers, split screens with simultaneous film footage and commentary, and the use of live studio audiences, not to mention simultaneous Twitter feeds and Facebook status updates. These techniques are themselves symbolic of the immediacy of television and its power in integrating and representing dispersed real-time events (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 188) but these older affordances are now increasingly amplified by digital newer media. Customization, searching, filtering, copying, and pasting have become the norm in newsrooms and in political activism and campaigning. At the same time, the internet has been an important part of the transition away from the idea of computers as office machines and the growth of computing devices of many kinds, from notebooks to smartphones

to tablet devices, as technologies for consuming and producing all forms of media.

During the 1996 elections in the United States, CNN presented all of the results on their website as they rolled in. This was the first time that broadcasting's immediacy—its status as a real-time medium for informing the American public about their political fate—was contested. CNN's site crashed on several occasions due to the demand, but it was a hint that some form of integration of the television screen and the computer screen might become the experience for future election nights. Fast forward to 2012, when 11 percent of Americans *dual-screened* the first live televised presidential debate. In other words, they watched the debate live on television but simultaneously followed along and in many cases produced real-time social media commentary about the debate (Pew Research Center, 2012).

In its use of computer-style interfaces, television has often provided viewers with little more than an illusory sense of interactivity. But television interactivity has recently evolved a great deal in response to the internet. Television news now frequently displays viewer commentary that has been supplied via e-mail, text message, Twitter, or webcam, as part of a digital montage approach to representation. Television news shows like Al Jazeera's *The Stream* stretch this approach still further, by emulating the interfaces of online communication in a hybrid mix of Skype video calls, Facebook posts, Twitter updates, and traditional broadcast news anchors. So in an important sense, subject still to the influence of editorial gatekeeping, audiences can sometimes mobilize the logics of newer media to exert greater power over the flows of real-time television news, as it happens. Television streamed over the web grants viewers an even more literal sense of control. We may choose to stop the stream, browse to other sites, place our web chat, Facebook, or Twitter feeds alongside the streaming video, and watch these competing but also complementary representations unfold in real time. By contributing commentary online we are both the subject and the object of this hybrid system. If digital new media hybridize media of representation, communication, and monitoring, the contemporary experience of watching a television show while participating in online (p.57) discussion about the show on Twitter further recombines these associations, encouraging us to make rapid shifts backwards and forwards along a continuum from passive consumption to active production.

Television program makers now seek to create content that will spark such connections across media, with the central aim of fostering online

communities and networks that will generate and recirculate resources signifying loyalty and enthusiasm. Even if program makers do not consciously do this, a vast range of amateur online content that connects in one way or another with what happens on television is often only a Google search away. Some entertainment media have pushed this approach beyond branding tie-ins and toward what Henry Jenkins has termed “transmedia storytelling.” The Matrix trilogy of Hollywood films is Jenkins’ classic early example, with its blend of professionally produced and consciously integrated transmedia narratives distributed across the film, the Blu-ray extras, the web downloads, and the computer games that have all coevolved with online communities’ discussions of the film’s meaning and appeal. This process transcends earlier approaches which saw the simple duplication of a “base” product like a film character (2006: 95–96).

But does the term “convergence” adequately capture these processes? First popularized during the 1970s as a way of describing the integration of computers, broadcasting, and telecommunications systems as the carriers of images, sound, and text, forty years on the idea of convergence continues to exercise its grip on the media industries and scholars alike, even though the reality has always been much messier than envisaged. The central problem with convergence has been its underlying assumption of a single delivery platform to which all media will inevitably be drawn. In practice, as Jenkins himself has admitted, there have been partial and shifting alliances between different media, as well as competition and resistance to change among older media in response to the new. Turf wars among those involved in the production and distribution of media and information have always diluted convergence. Where it does occur, convergence has been partial and contingent and based in discrete sectors of the media; it has not happened in the holistic sense originally predicted by influential scholars such as [Ithiel de Sola Pool \(1983b\)](#). The democratization of media production that is occurring through the proliferation and distribution of digital technologies requires us to move beyond convergence theory’s preoccupation with the production and dissemination of content through a single hierarchically organized delivery channel.

One problem with the “convergence culture” approach is its equation of “online” with “grassroots” activism. The rise of online media elites, the increasing use of the logics of online media by those working in older media together with the ongoing intervention by non-elites in the construction of political news and information brings this dualism into question. When such large numbers of bloggers are now integrated into professionalized or

semi-professionalized news production, when citizen activists are integrated into news-making assemblages through their participation as bloggers or Twitter and Facebook users, and when the vast majority of older media organizations have moved into the online environment, it is not always accurate to counterpose an online participatory culture against a centralized, top-down, broadcast media culture.

In addition, transmediality continues to evolve, as new genres associated with the hybridization of television with newer online social media are increasingly brought into play. Nick Anstead and Ben O'Loughlin's pioneering analysis of real-time tweeting (p.58) during the BBC's famous political discussion show *Question Time* in 2009 reveals the same logic but extends the analysis beyond genre. Anstead and O'Loughlin identify the emergence of politically engaged audiences who "use online publishing platforms and social tools to interpret, publicly comment on, and debate a television broadcast while they are watching it," creating "centripetal dynamics that pull disparate and often-distanced individuals into a mainstream political event" (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011: 441, 457). As we shall see at many points throughout this book, these are emerging as important facets of campaign communication and the construction of news. Jenkins argued that the rise of online fan communities means that the main dynamic in television is the "shift from real-time interaction toward asynchronous participation" (Jenkins, 2006: 59), but in fact the reverse seems to be occurring, as ad hoc online communities now routinely form on Twitter and Facebook in response to television shows as they are aired. Little of this was in evidence during the early period of the internet in the 1990s and 2000s. But when the real-time communication affordances of social media suddenly emerged in the mid-2000s, this pushed things in a different direction, and in ways that simultaneously enhance the popularity and legitimacy of both online and broadcast media forms.

Finally, transmediality is now also structured by users in ways that have nothing to do with professional media's attempts to generate "buzz." Take, for example, the group of individuals who use Twitter to assume the identities of the fictional cast of the television political drama, *The West Wing*. Though they have no connection with the show, their linguistic styles are eerily similar to those of the original characters. But their expression goes beyond mere mimicry, as they playfully construct a hybrid political space somewhere between fictional television entertainment and online political activism. In theirs and the worlds of their thousands of followers, the current president of the United States is not Barack Obama, but Matthew

Santos, while “former president” Jed Bartlet tweets from a position of highly informed and highly engaged semi-retirement. The key point here is that the commentary of the Twitter *West Wing* cast is almost entirely aimed at current political events. “Bartlet” spends a great deal of time baiting real-life Republicans as well as commenting, often in considerable detail, on the daily machinations of Washington politics (Bartlet, 2011). As the anonymous author behind the account says, “I’d rather they see Jed Bartlet when they read the tweets, and not me.” His approach, he says, is to read “a few political pages bookmarked on Twitter...every morning to sort of get a bearing on what I’m going to tweet about that day and what President Bartlet would have to say about that” (Pappas, 2010). The facade of pure role play occasionally drops when the characters interact with other fans who enthuse about their recent viewings of reruns of the “real” television show. During such fleeting moments, this transmedia remediation of the original show is exposed, before normal business is resumed.

Conclusion

To revisit the phrase I used in the opening to chapter 2, all older media were once newer and all newer media eventually get older. Media and media systems are always in the process of becoming. The power relations within and between media—where media are understood as confluences of technologies, social practices, and publics—change (p.59) over time, and with important results. But the older and the newer adapt, interact, and coevolve. This is a process characterized by immense flux, competition, and power. Media practices intermingle and compete, but sometimes aspects of media practice may become sealed off from outside influence, following processes of boundary-drawing and the delineation of reserved domains.

As this chapter has shown, the media systems that are the focus of this book—those of Britain and the United States—are now hybrid, contradictory, mixtures of older, newer, and what Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin have rightly termed “renewed” media (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2010). Older media, primarily television, radio, and newspapers are still, given the size of their audiences and their centrality to public life, rightly referred to as “mainstream,” but the very nature of the mainstream is itself changing. While older media organizations are adapting, evolving, and renewing their channels of delivery, working practices and audiences, newer media are achieving popularity and becoming part of a new mainstream. Television retains its primacy in the mediation of politics, though it is now accompanied by a panoply of online media activity, some of it facilitated by

broadcasters themselves. Politicians, journalists, and publics are creating these new complexities—and adapting to them. Political communication is in transition. While broadcasting still remains at the heart of public life, the nature of mediated politics is evolving rapidly and is being pushed and pulled in multiple directions by multiple actors. Some of these forces are contradictory, some are integrative; all are generative of systemic hybridity.

The way political elites, media elites, and publics produce and consume political information is changing. As use of the internet and mobile technologies has grown, so these media have become an important space for those creating and consuming political news. Audiences have never had access to so much political information through such a variety of news media. Digital technologies provide new opportunities for audiences to engage in political activities, express their opinions, and contribute public information in historically unprecedented ways. In some respects, the internet is contributing greater fluidity and openness to what social movement scholars would term the political opportunity structure: the constellation of political institutions that enable and constrain collective action and mobilization (Kitschelt, 1986). Increasingly, publics are able to exert influence and hold politicians and media to account through the use of newer media logics. All of the evidence suggests that growth in the numbers taking advantage of these newer media logics is likely to continue, but this growth will occur in the context of the evolution of older media's power and older media logics.

The rest of this book examines in more detail a range of examples of hybridity in flow in the contemporary media systems of Britain and the United States. I begin in the next chapter with an interpretation of some of the momentous events surrounding the British general election of 2010.

Notes:

1. This section on Britain draws in part upon a paper I co-authored with James Stanyer, and which we presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in August 2010 (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2010).

