Tony Blair's Lecture on Public Life and the Media: Functional Applications for Business and Research

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The function of the media in covering news and events has changed in the past 20 years from one of strict division between news and opinion to a blending of the two into news commentary. This paper uses systems theory and structural functionalism to examine Tony Blair’s lecture on public life and the media. Lessons learned are suggested for business and research. Global market competitiveness requires businesses and organizations become more astute in dealing with the press.

Keywords: Mass media functions, Hard news and commentary, Toni Blair, Media relations, Organizational competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

Prior to his resignation as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair talked about the changing relationship between government leaders and the mass media and the adverse affect on public life:

... the relationship between politics, public life and the media is changing as a result of the changing context of communication in which we all operate. ... it is my view that the effect of this change is seriously adverse to the way public life is conducted; and that we need, at the least, a proper and considered debate about how we manage the future, in which it is in all our interests that the public is properly and accurately informed. (Blair, 2007, p. 1)

Government and the media, according to Blair, are complicit in creating the atmosphere of conflict in which they operate. The danger is that the public suffers because of a lack of facts. While government leaders have complained over the years about the media, the difference now is that quality and quantity of media coverage and the relationship with government has adversely changed.

The media world has changed because of the transformation of technology and fragmentation. For example, “Newspapers fight for a share of a shrinking market. Many are now read on-line, not the next day. Internet advertising has overtaken newspaper ads. There are roughly 70 million blogs in existence, with around 120,000 being created every day. In particular, younger people will, less and less, get their news from traditional outlets” (Blair, 2007, p.2).

While these changes are obvious, their effect is less obvious. “The news schedule is now 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It moves in real time. Papers don't give you up-to-date news. That's already out there. They have to break stories, try to lead the schedules. Or they give a commentary. And it all happens with outstanding speed” (Blair, 2007, pp2-3).

News narratives and the news agenda change just as quickly, Blair says, “You have to respond to stories also in real time. Frequently the problem is as much assembling the facts as giving them. Make a mistake and you quickly transfer from drama into crisis. . . Things harden within minutes. I mean you can't let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant” (Blair, 2007, p. 3).

The result is that

a vast aspect of our jobs today - outside of the really major decisions, as big as anything else - is coping with the media, its sheer scale, weight and constant hyperactivity. At points, it literally overwhelms. Talk to senior people in
virtually any walk of life today - business, military, public services, sport, even charities and voluntary organisations and they will tell you the same: People don’t speak about it because, in the main, they are afraid to. But it is true, nonetheless, and those who have been around long enough, will also say it has changed significantly in the past years (Blair, 2007, p. 3).

The consequences of this are acute, says Blair.

First, scandal or controversy “beats ordinary reporting hands down.” News is not news unless it “generates heat as much as or more than light.”

Second, “attacking motive is far more potent than attacking judgment.” Errors are reported as conspiracies with cover-ups. “What creates cynicism is not mistakes; it is allegations of misconduct.” Misconduct has impact (and makes good news) not mistakes.

Third, because of the “fear of missing out,” the media hunt in packs. As a result, people and reputations are torn to bits. But the media get their stories.

Fourth, the media no longer just report the news, “even if sensational or controversial.” Rather, news coverage entails commentary. As much time or more is spent interpreting what a politician says as reporting it. “What matters is not what they mean; but what they could be taken to mean.” The result is that a large amount of energy is spent rebutting claims that are unrelated to what was intended.

Fifth, this leads to the confusion of news and commentary. While comment (or opinion) is “a perfectly respectable part of journalism,” it should be separate from news coverage. “Opinion and fact should be clearly divisible” in the minds of the audience. It has become routine for the media to leave out news coverage in favor of commentary.

This paper examines Blair’s comments in light of mass media functions in political decision making. Previous studies have used systems theory and structural functionalism to identify the role the mass media play in policy making. An examination of functions showed a distinct separation between opinion and hard news. This study revisits the tools used in systems theory and structural functionalism to look at emerging media functions as described by Blair. It tries to answer the question: What has the effect of changing media functions been on political decision making and what are the implications for businesses and organizations?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The examination of mass media functions in covering business and government grew out of systems theory and structural functionalism. Because researchers use the underlying assumptions and approaches of systems theory and structural functionalism in studies of organizations and institutions, it is important to understand the essential suppositions used in these two methods (Fisher, 2010). These suppositions will be used in analyzing Blair’s speech. The findings will be used to make recommendations for business and research. Global market competitiveness requires that businesses and organizations have more understanding and become more capable in working with the press.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is particularly apt in examining organizations or institutions under stress. The system’s history of response to stress allows analysts to determine whether a system is able to survive disturbances. Easton claimed that system analysis is especially suited “for interpreting the behavior of the members in a system in the light of the consequences this behavior has for alleviating or aggravating stress upon the essential variables” (1966, p. 149).

Easton used the term “exchanges” to refer to “the mutuality of the relationships between the political system and the other systems in the environment.” The term “transactions” was used “to emphasize the movement of an effect in one direction, from an environmental system to the political system, or the reverse, without being concerned at the time about the reactive behavior of the other system” (1966, p. 150).
Because systems are coupled together, all behavior in society is dependent on each other. To trace the complex exchanges and reduce them to manageable proportions, Easton condensed the main environmental influences into a few indicators. He designated the effects that are transmitted across the boundary of a system toward some other system as the outputs of the first system and as the inputs of the second system. A transaction or an exchange between systems can be viewed as a linkage between them in the form of an input-output relationship.

By focusing on boundary-crossing inputs dealing with the most important effects contributing to stress, the task of analyzing the impact of the environment can be simplified. Analysts no longer need “to deal with and trace out separately the consequences of each type of environmental event.” For this purpose, Easton recommends focusing in two major inputs: demands and support.

As inputs to a system, demands and supports can be of different types: material and political demands as well as material and political supports. By examining the changes in the inputs of demands and support, analysts can determine the effects of the environmental systems transmitted to the political system.

Similarly, outputs help interpret “the consequences flowing from the behavior of the members of the system rather than from actions in the environment” (Easton, 1966, p. 151).

Because a great amount of activity takes place within a political system, it is useful to isolate those elements that are important in understanding the system. One way of doing this is to examine the impact of inputs (reflected as demands and support) on political outputs. Easton defines political outputs as the decisions and actions of the authorities.

Easton claimed that “outputs not only help to influence events in the broader society of which the system is a part, but also, in doing so, they help to determine each succeeding round of inputs that finds its way into the political system” (1966, p. 152). By identifying this “feedback loop,” analysts can explain the processes the system can use to cope with stress and make recommendations that alter the systems future behavior.

### Structural Functionalism

While structure-functionalism, predated systems theory it still presupposes a “systems” view of the political world. Similarities link functionalism to systems analysis. Susser (1992, p. 202) writes that both focus on “input-output” analysis, both see political systems as striving for homeostasis or equilibrium; and both consider “feedback” into their analysis.

David Easton listed five modes of action as elements of all political systems: legislation, administration, adjudication, the development of demands, and the development of support and solidarity. These were grouped as input and output requirements of political systems. According to Almond (1961), the required inputs are political socialization and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation, and political communication. As outputs he identified rulemaking, rule application, and rule adjudication.

To find concepts and categories appropriate for use in comparing developing countries they turned to sociological and anthropological theory (Almond, 1960). Rather than adding new terms, they adopted and adapted an old vocabulary to a new situation. Instead of the concept of “state,” which would be limited by legal and institutional meanings, they used “political system”; instead of “powers” with its legal connotations, they preferred “functions”; instead of “offices,” they used “roles”; instead of “institutions,” which directs thinking toward formal norms, they used “structures”; instead of “public opinion” and “citizenship training,” they preferred “political culture” and “political socialization.”

With the concepts of input and output Almond and Coleman (Almond, 1960) moved from a definition of “political” to that of “system.” System properties interpret interactions of society while “political” separate out the interactions in order to relate them to other concepts. Among the properties were comprehensiveness, interdependence, and boundaries.

Almond listed seven functions to all political systems: political socialization, interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication, rule making, rule application and rule adjudication. The first four belong to the input side of a system’s functioning, while the last three to its policy outputs. Political communication links inputs to outputs in a way that provides the function of a “feedback loop.” While Easton’s systems analysis deals primarily with “demands and supports,”
Almond's categorization of inputs and outputs in the political system is much more extensive, and in fact has led to a multifaceted approach to the study of politics.

In Almond and Powell's (1966) study of political systems, they considered the activities or functions from three points of view: the conversion functions of interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication, rule making, rule application, and rule adjudication; the operation and capabilities of the political system in its environments; and the way in which political systems maintain or adapt themselves to pressures for change over the long term. These latter functions referred to the maintenance and adaptation functions of political recruitment and political socialization.

Many of Almond's categories have become unique fields of study. For example, Fisher's research on mass media effect on political decision making drew upon Almond's categories and mass media functions to develop a taxonomy of media functions in policy making (Fisher, 1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008). While the systems view often refers to the "nondescript conversion process" (Susser, 1992, p. 206), the functionalist approach deals explicitly the steps involved from articulating requirements to fulfilling political outputs.

Practical Applications: Media Functions in Policy Making

Fisher's studies of mass media functions in policy making show how structural functionalism fits within systems theory (Fisher, 1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008). Fourteen media functions were found to exist in six policy stages (Almond & Powell, 1978, pp. 14-15, 180; Dunn, 1981, p. 48; Jones, 1977, p. 12; Wirt & Mitchell, 1982, pp. 6-7). To arrive at the 14 media functions in the policy process, Fisher adapted Lambeth's (1978, p. 12; see also Fico, 1984, pp. 795, 799) 10 media functions. Within the first policy stage of (1) problem identification/articulation were found two media functions: (a) identification of problems by media and (b) relaying problems to the public. Within stage 2, policy recommendation/aggregation, the media were found to function in three ways: (a) identification of groups and proposals, (b) identification of policymaker proposals, and (c) media suggestion of content. In stage 3, policy decision/adoption, the media functioned by (a) setting tempo of decision making, (b) recommending how to vote, and (c) informing public of content. Within stage 4, policy implementation, the media functioned by (a) describing administration and (b) alerting public to problems. Within stage 5, policy evaluation, were found the media functions of (a) evaluating effectiveness and (b) reacting to policy. Finally, within stage 6, policy resolution or change, were found the media functions of (a) stimulating review and (b) proposing change or termination.

Fisher (1991) identified information distribution as the principal function of the media in the policy making process. Reporting the news was the main vehicle for information distribution. The only exceptions where persuasion was evident were in function 2 (c) media suggestion of content, 3 (b) recommending how to vote, and 6 (a) stimulating review. Only 5.6 percent of all articles fell into these categories and could be considered opinion. Fully, 94 percent of articles were news.

In his study of lawmakers' use of reporters, Lambeth found that reporters were more influential in the five functions involving their potential impact in transmitting information to the public than in the functions involving personal or professional influence in the legislative setting. Fisher used content analysis in his study of mass media functions (1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008) to determine the role of the media in informing or persuading the public and policymakers. Fisher confirmed Lambeth's finding that reporters are more influential in functions involving transmittal of information to the public and less important in functions involving personal and professional influence in the legislative setting. In addition, the study seemed to bear out Lambeth's conclusion that the impact of the press on elected officials is low to moderate.

Fisher (1991) and Fisher and Soemarsono (2008) provide an example of the relationship among systems, structures, and functions. While the policy stages are functions in the political system, they also provide structure for the media functions. The first two provide input functions in the political system. The next is a process function. The last three serve as output functions. Labeling of functions becomes important because the structure provides a way of examining organizational and institutional impact. As one example, the understanding of press impact allows business and government leaders to improve their decision making and better adapt to changing and more competitive global markets.
FINDINGS

The following questions and answers provide the analysis of Blair’s speech and suggest recommendations that are made in the conclusions section. The first set of questions provides an analysis of systems while the second identify functions of the media in politics.

Systems Analysis

What are the stresses between the political system and the media system described by Blair?
Because of the changing context in which the media operate, the relationship between politics, public life and the media has changed, adversely affecting “the way public life is conducted.” The result is that the public is no longer “properly and accurately informed,” according to Blair.

What are the particular behaviors resulting from the relationship and what are the consequences?
Because of changing technology, shrinking markets, and media fragmentation, the news schedule is now 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. “It moves in real time,” says Blair. Papers no longer give up to date news and in-depth coverage. They break news and lead the schedules. They also provide commentary on the news as opposed to just reporting the news. News is no longer separated commentary. Newspapers have blogs and podcasts that are updated constantly. Television has 24 hour news that consists mainly of commentary on the news. Reporters interview other reporters for news and comments. Talk radio is another source of commentary.

How dependent are the two systems on each other?
The politicians are dependent on the media to get information to the public and to a degree to persuade the public to accept their agenda. The press needs politicians to provide them with information that provides the basis for news and commentary. While the relationship, according to Blair, may not be a good one, they are co-dependent upon each other. One without the other would not survive.

What outputs of one system are inputs into the other?
Politicians provide information to the media. However, the problem is less a matter of assembling the facts, but more related to delivery. “Make a mistake and you quickly transfer from drama to crisis,” says Blair.

What demands does each system make of the other?
The media are looking for “scandal or controversy” because they beat “ordinary reporting hands down.” News must be more than information. Rather than simply informing, news must “excite and titillate” the public. Politicians depend on the media to be a mediator between them and the public. Not only do they want their message relayed but in such a way that they will be viewed favorably by the public and get re-elected.

What support is provided from one to the other?
While politicians may complain about poor media coverage, they still depend on the media to get their message to the public. Similarly, the media require “support” in terms of information for stories and commentary. In this sense, their relationship is symbiotic.

What is the impact of the media inputs (demands and supports) on political outputs?
Blair claims that a vast majority of what the politicians do today is “coping with the media, its sheer scale, weight and constant hyperactivity.” Politicians become “totally demoralised,” not because of the criticism, but because of the lack of balance. The public trust for both journalists and politicians is very low. “We are all being dragged down by the way media and public life interact,” says Blair.

What feedback is provided to each system that helps them cope with stress and adapt?
Blair’s speech about the media relationship provided feedback that could help both systems cope with each other. While the speech was regarded cynically by some in the media (Riddell et al., 2007), it gave the public and the media insights as to Blair’s experience with the media as prime minister of the United Kingdom. He claims that the best hope for change is the fact that the media are accountable daily through the choice of readers and viewers. Yet, he is concerned because “viewers and readers have no objective yardstick to measure what they are being told.” Politicians are made accountable every few years through elections, but “they are also profoundly accountable daily through the media -- which is why a free press is so important,” says Blair.
Media Functions in Politics

What role do the media play in legislation, administration, adjudication, the development of demands, and the development of support and solidarity?
Previous studies of media functions in politics (Fico, 1984; Fisher, 1991; Fisher & Soemarsono, 2008; Lambeth, 1978), suggest stronger support in legislation than in administration and adjudication. The media role appears to be positive in the development of demands and mostly negative in the development of support and solidarity (Blair, 2007).

What political functions do the media support: political socialization, interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication, rulemaking, rule application, and rule adjudication?
While the media may play a role in all of these areas, their primary function is in the area of political communication. However, as Blair explains the media may be failing in this area as they provide less news and more opinion and commentary.

Because of its relationship with the media, how has the political system changed or adapted the conversion functions of interest articulation, interest aggregation, political communication, rulemaking, rule application, and rule adjudication?
According to Blair, politicians spend more time dealing with the media and less with the day-to-day running of government. Political communication trumps all of the other functions.

Because of its relationship with the media, how has the operation and capabilities of the political system been affected in its environments?
Politicians have become more cautious and less forthright in their responses to the media. Politicians come into public life with the intention to serve and do the right thing. From Blair’s point of view, the people have not changed, but the context in which they work has changed.

In what ways does the political system maintain or adapt itself to pressures for change over the long term?
Blair introduced a number of measures to become more open and accessible to the public. He put lobby briefings on record, published minutes, gave monthly press conferences, opened up access through Freedom of Information, attended public committee meetings, but to no avail. The central issue is not that there is not enough information, but rather it is how politics is reported. In the long term, the public will suffer as politicians become more deceptive or retrench altogether.

How do the media perform their roles of information dissemination and persuasion? How effective are the media in transmitting information to the public versus influencing the political process?
Fisher (1991) found that the media played a persuasive role only six percent of the time and an information role 94 percent of the time. Blair would say the roles have changed with news and information being subservient to commentary and persuasion. Blair claims that the media confuse news and commentary. Commentary is supposed to be separate, but much of what the public gets is blended news and commentary.

What impact do politicians say that the media have on the political decision-making process?
Lambeth (1978) and Fisher (1991) found that reporters were more influential in functions involving their potential impact in transmitting information to the public rather than in functions having personal or professional influence in the legislative setting. With increased commentary has come more advocacy journalism. While the media messages may be more persuasive in tenor, still politicians would likely say the media influence in the political process is less than the personal of influence of constituents.

CONCLUSIONS

How can businesses and organizations best survive the stresses created by this new relationship with the media? Blair put his faith on readers and viewers. While viewers and readers may not always be able to judge the accuracy of the information they get from the press, they also have become critical consumers and better evaluators of the media product. While market segmentation may have created the frenzy in news reporting and new technologies may have brought about a 24/7 circus
atmosphere, these changes have also provided audiences more media choices. The key for businesses is to find market niches for their messages and find media that reach these audiences.

Blair also suggested the use of alternative media and the internet. While these means of communication have weaknesses and dangers, they have greater potential to control and get the correct message to desired audience. Some organizations are encouraging their members to become advocates on their personal social media. The number of people using the internet is now in the billions.

This study suggests the need for further examination of media impact and functions. The framework provided by systems theory and structural functionalism seems to be an appropriate mechanism for these studies. While a many of the political studies from the 1960s and 1970s used systems theory and structural functionalism as their framework (Susser, 1992), enthusiasm for the approaches soon waned. The approaches still have practical value in establishing taxonomies and jumping off points to use other methods in studying organizations and institutions (like the mass media). Understanding business and politics in the global context requires cultural and political syntax, much of which continues to be based on structural functionalism and systems theory.

REFERENCES


