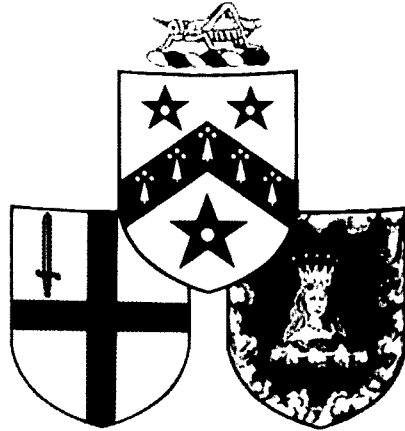


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RHETORIC AND ETHICS 1999-2000

A report by Professor Lynette Hunter (Gresham Professor of Rhetoric) of her discussions with eminent commentators on contemporary society.

**Ethics and Government: Decency and Authority
with Professor Peter Hennessy
3 November 1999**

**Ethics and Economics: Can Socialism Survive Global Capital?
with Will Hutton
10 November 1999**

**Ethics and Journalism: Fact, Fiction or Spin?
with James Naughtie
17 November 1999**

RHETORIC AND ETHICS 1999-2000

1. Ethics and Government: Decency and Authority

Professors Peter Hennessy and Lynette Hunter discussed issues to do with current government practices, and in particular addressed the need for on-going ethical awareness as Britain moves into new modes of working. One area of discussion, that remained unresolved, was that of whether Britain should or should not have a written code of ethics for government. Clearly there are advantages, especially for groups of people new to government, in having such guidelines but the disadvantage is that once written down, guides have the tendency to turn into inflexible codes. Another disadvantage is that with the increasing power of executive central government, an ethical 'code' can be restrictive rather than enabling.

This transcript offers the outline to Professor Hennessy's paper, given first at the lecture, and a fuller account of Professor Hunter's, to which she has added retrospective comments marked out by square brackets.

Professor Peter Hennessy:

This theme is central to the twin research streams in which I swim, which are general history and Constitution/government.

There is great difficulty in measuring shifts here, just as it is not easy to demonstrate a 'dumbing down' of the media.

1. Constitution

Here there are few boundaries or sanctions – hence the 'good chap' theory of government which relies as Gladstone put it, on the 'good faith and good sense of those who work' (interesting verb) our constitution.

A career civil service is central here.

2. General

Contrast the notions of today's 'decency' current in Mr Atlee's time with sleaze preoccupation.

Much depends on a certain kind of self and national identity. A sense of probity must remain central to our notions of what makes us and our systems of governance special.

There has been a deterioration. Why? Because we have become a 'win at all costs' society in politics, government, business, and sport. Money values are increasingly paramount and we live in an ever fiercer blame culture.

The media aid and abet this partly because their version of competition (at the tabloid end especially) leaves no room for restraint.

As a consequence, we have to look to new codes and laws. The Nolan-Neill committees on standards in public life have done (and needed to do) much good work.

More widely, with the Human Rights Act, we are moving to a rights rather than a duties culture.

There are pluses and minuses about these changes, but I fear soon we will no longer be able to claim that we are somehow special as a political or a commercial society. I regret it but it has to be faced.

Professor Lynette Hunter

Ethics is a two-edged sword -- most things in rhetoric have at least two edges and usually more, and ethics is no exception, but it does have two particularly sharp edges. Since the beginning of recorded comments on ethics people have spoken of it as an activity in which the members of a society participate. They discuss, debate, argue, and come to agree on common grounds for decisions that lead to actions. And if they are being attentive they follow up by evaluating the impact of their actions. On the other hand, 'ethics' are often spoken of as the social rules for behaviour: static and inflexible.

Certainly it is impossible to think through every single case that comes up in our lifetime, we would never get on with the business of living. We tend to remember certain kinds of decision-making, and apply those structures to analogous situations. It's a bit like case law, and it's not surprising that governments, which are charged with implementing many of society's ethical agreements, and law are closely linked. Much of the function of government is to decide on legislation. What gives governments the legitimacy to implement those agreements, what gives them their authority, depends on the political system: in Britain a parliamentary democracy.

Every time we vote we legitimate the government's authority, we participate in consenting to the platform of the party we support. Clearly some governments become authoritarian, coercive, seeking only assent rather than consent. They simply implement rules that they make up, and do not discuss anything -- or more problematically, make it difficult to discuss, or to be heard discussing, so they give the illusion of participation but no facilitation. This distinction between assent and consent has been made since Aristotle at least, who pointed out that a rhetoric of assent was not appropriate for public life, only for special interest groups like science (and as science democratises we are finding out that the rhetoric of assent is inappropriate in science as well).

One finds the same two-edged sword around the idea of 'decency'. This is something George Orwell noted and spent much of his time between 1937 and 1948 worrying away at. He was concerned that an individual could be 'decent' in the sense of paying attention to others, being tolerant, and so on, but that the 'decent chaps' were often completely ignorant of other parts of the public. They were only decent in their own terms. You could always trust them to do what's expected, and in Orwell's context of World War Two that must have seemed a dangerous thing.

Decency though is complex. It has long rhetorical links with 'decorum' which always focuses on context, and the need to think through the specifics of each and every situation. And decency retains a lot of this complexity, as Peter Hennessy points out. Precisely because they don't have a formal code of ethics, civil servants or the 'good chaps' of the government, can remain flexible and responsive to specific events. One problem arises when they take actions in ignorance of a changing society.

Without a formal code that takes account of this, they may not be alerted to the need for new ideas of what decent behaviour might be. They have no other authority or legitimation for their actions except for 'training', and if that training has not kept pace with society there will be inappropriate decision-making.

At least we vote for governments. But this system, which has been in place for several centuries, was devised for like-minded people of similar status, ethnicity, religion and gender. The small number of people who voted, and the even smaller number who went to parliament as representatives from the seventeenth century to today, may have had some disagreements, but they frequently had much more in common, beginning with their education.

From early in this century this consensus began radically to change as millions of voters entered the democratic system, suddenly thinking they had access to power. But in effect, as we found out in the post-war period, particularly in 1968, the 'representatives' who went to parliament were not really representative. They still by and large came from that same small group of people which had always sent MPs to London.

With a full franchise, how can government be representative? and without appropriate representation how can there be trust? How can an enfranchised population actively consent to government rather than merely assent? How do groups socially marginal to the mainstream get access to the ears of government, let alone access to power?

[This was Professor Hunter's major concern: the shift in the make-up of those represented in parliament, and the need for change to ensure appropriate access. However, in the course of the discussion it became clear that there is another issue coming from a different direction: the fact that governments in Britain over the past 20 years have become increasingly more orientated to executive decision-making reduces the participation of civil servants in deciding on the implementation of policy. Even were they trained appropriately, it would be difficult to put that knowledge into practice. Indeed with executive government, ethical guidelines for discussion, decision and action, are little more than window-dressing.] The fact is that our government is not fully representative and that this raises a lot of ethical questions, perhaps most obviously in the overlap between politicians and the civil service.

Take for example the issue of gender awareness. Women are hardly a minority, but they are still marginal to power. Even if a woman goes to her MP's local surgery and raises an important issue -- such as why can't her husband benefit from her pension when she dies, after all it works the other way and women these days are increasingly in a position to build healthy pension funds -- to which the MP is sympathetic, she or he will go back to government and be faced with a largely male group of people to convince, a treasury that (although it is changing) is still staffed by decent chaps who aren't prepared to work the issue out partly because they do not see it as an issue in the first place.

Take for example the issue of the financing of education under the current government: huge sums of money are saved by cutting student grants, yet substantial money is given to primary education. The impact on tertiary education has been appalling, especially in terms of staff morale and energy, yet many of us would agree that primary education is very important. Or the financing of the NHS which has led to some highly publicised cases of hospitals that have had to deny an operation to someone on the grounds that for the same cost they can save the lives of four others with 'cheaper' problems.

In neither of these cases is the government directly responsible, but how far should it be responsible for ethical issues that result from the implementation of its policy? There is a problem, certainly, that many MPs have only a distanced understanding of the effects of poverty on large proportion of the public. But even if they were as conscientious as they could be there is the 'three-line whip' which may require them to vote against their conscience. Many MPs, as much as we distrust them, do actually want to effect change 'for the better'. They want to act on social injustice not just let it lie there. They want to be 'decent chaps'. Yet the system as it stands is not ethical in the better sense, and can't be because of the difficulty of access to power and the inappropriateness of representation.

What do we do? Some people think proportional representation will help. I suspect that a sensible Freedom of Information Bill would be enabling. Not that people in parliament or government more generally would become better behaved but that the public would have better access, and better grounds on which to participate in decision-making and evaluate the impact of policy.

But there's a long way to go.

2. Ethics and Economics: Can Socialism Survive Global Finance?

Will Hutton and Professor Lynette Hunter

While the two parts of this discussion were devised independently, it's interesting that there are so many overlaps in concern. Both speakers turned to issues of ethics and global economics in terms of the political impact of multinationals, extending the focus of the first lecture in the series which concentrated on ethics and the more internal politics of government. As Will Hutton says in *The State to Come* (1997):

Britain must, in short, become a polity of properly enfranchised citizens which itself is subject to the constitution of law. In this sense political, economic and social reform go hand in hand: success depends on moving on all fronts. (104)

Questions addressed by the discussants included: Should multinationals have ethical obligations, and if so, to whom? Should multinationals be able to sue national governments for profits lost through laws in those nations? Is socialism fundamentally antipathetic to multinational capital?

This transcript offers an outline to Mr Hutton's presentation, given first at the lecture, and a fuller account of Professor Hunter's.

Will Hutton

What will socialism be like in the 21st century? As initially conceived, with a planned economy and the socialisation of the means of production, socialism is dead. Not only has it led to a static notion of what an economy constitutes, with backward-looking technology, but co-ordinating by central planning is not compatible with individual liberty.

Today, with hyperglobalisation, we are facing a world becoming globalised in an enormous number of areas. Despite that fact that many people claim that the world has known globalisation for many centuries, through the institution of the Roman Catholic church for one, what we are faced with now is quite different. Today we have a massive spread of technological advance, that is parallel to but different from that between 1890-1920.

Then, there was technological change, changes in the position of women in society, changes in capitalism. The socialism that emerged was a response to the vigorous capitalism of that period, and it developed an ethic of equality, justice, neighbourliness that is just as necessary now in a world of profit-maximisers and contract capitalists that is brutal, barbaric and anti-humane.

Certain instruments are not available to us anymore, but there is for example the concept of stakeholding. The left of centre is not about the re-distribution of income, the planned economy and the socialisation of the means of production, but is involved in a more subtle democratising of social capital. The 24-hour world capital market is a reality. The collapse of Asian banking last year (1998) and its effects, is a reality. It is not capitalism that has gone wrong, but the systematic structure of global capital markets, the structure of speculation. And markets either comply with that structure or get a punishing response. Similar arguments can be made for the pressure put upon governments and companies in the area of labour strategies, environment and climate change.

Multinationals need to have guidelines about how they should behave. It's not just a choice between banging up trade barriers or socialising the globe - there are extraordinary tensions and opportunities for good in the present situation. After all, life expectancy is up, the per capita income is increasing, and the birth-rate is up. Yet there are stunning numbers of people living in poverty. The question is not how we should socialise one nation, but how to govern global capital. We need a global world financial authority, and a body to which it is accountable. Perhaps a global parliament as an elected second chamber in the United Nations, and a developing sense of a global civil society.

A number of multinationals have realised the need for different behaviour, sometimes being alerted to it by consumer power: after protests from consumers Unilever has moved to encourage sustainable fishing, Heineken has withdrawn from Burma. But we need to take globalisation seriously and to develop this global civil society. We are already seeing problems that result when we do not: many of the fundamentalist movements that have come to prominence are in effect reactions to the lack of global discussion and policy. The service sector all over the world is better off, and women dominate in this area, suddenly begin to have social presence.

Fundamentalism is often grounded as an anti-woman sect deriving from the forces of globalisation. More than anything else at the moment, Britain needs to begin this process and go into Europe.

Professor Lynette Hunter:

The reason I suggested this session is that I have questions for myself about the relationship between national governments and their ethical frameworks, and global flows of information, finance, trade, which have increasing impact on the 'nation', particularly on how it implements socialism. If I focused last week on issues of representation and access, the context today brings me to rights and duties.

What gives us rights? How do they (or not) differ from duties? The notion of rights usually crops up in terms of 'natural law', we often hear and even find ourselves saying, 'it's only natural that...' as if there is some biological sense of 'rightness'. The rallying call to 'Liberty, equality and fraternity' that inspired the liberal social contract of Britain, was of course only for a small group of people. The concept of special rights for women, for working-class men, for people of different ethnic backgrounds, had to be tacked on for those outside the group. During the late 1970s and the 80s Carol Pateman gave us a critique of the social contract that turned this approach around so that we could begin to see that in fact, whether or not others had 'rights', it was the small group in power who had 'special rights' different from those accorded to other people. This reversal is exceptionally interesting and casts a completely different light over the last few centuries of democratic change. Rights, curiously, has little to do with ethics. Good political ethics are discussed and argued over, grounds are agreed upon, decisions taken and actions ensue which need to be assessed and evaluated. Ethics has to be socially specific, but rights don't work that way because they give the person with the 'right' added power. Yet what about the right to say, water, to breath (clean) air? We get the vocabulary mixed up, but ethics are engaged social agreements about social and

individual behaviour that offer guidelines to where duty and obligation may lie. Rights are fossilised ethics, while duties are in process and socially responsive.

One of the problems we face has come about because the very people who had special rights in Pateman's sense were those who nurtured capitalism into the structures we now live with. Both represent that private individual, using capital as a naïve Darwinian selection device to drive out altruism, Tennyson's 'nature' red in tooth and claw, Hutton's brutal and barbaric contract capitalists. But there is no need for capital to work this way. After all one of the interpretations of the history of capitalism is that it emerged as a social mechanism to provide for regulated competition, to stop people fighting civil wars (now of course it's difficult to tell the difference between national and civil wars). As such it was essential for the formation of nation states as we know them in the west. Nation states offer their private citizens stability and protection, while in return citizens fight, die, and increasingly, buy, for the nation.

This arrangement spawned its own ethical problems, that took several hundred years to recognise - that perhaps what a nation should offer is duty to its citizens rather than rights for some of them. Socialism as a counteraction to the notion of rights has been there in one form or another since capitalism. In the sixteenth century when capitalism was gathering its power, many spoke of the idea of the 'common wealth', wealth held in common. Although it took little time, only 70 years, to twist this concept away from its concern with equality, it has re-emerged in most periods. In our own it has led to the construction of a public sector that can speak, argue, decide and act as representative of groups barred from power, offering protection to a different kind of person than the classic idea of the property-owning citizen.

Socialism is not in itself ethical, the public sector is not in itself representative. Nor is capital in itself unethical. Recently some businesses themselves have recognised a responsibility to become ethical, significantly in the area of local business where responsibilities and the negotiation of duties can more easily take place because the people affected are all physically together. But there is a real problem with ethics as the range widens and we have to try to encompass a number of different social, economic and cultural needs. It is difficult to be responsive to all of them.

The global finance of the multinationals is new in its extent, and it is difficult to see where its responsibility lies, where its communities for discussion are located. It is sometimes rather like second-order science, in which a number of different laboratories all over the world may be taking part in a larger research project, no one of them really seeing the whole picture except perhaps for the businesses that fund the projects. All economically disadvantaged groups rely on the public sector to redistribute income and rectify inequalities, but since any public sector is fundamentally part of national government, if nations are impacted by global finance there is a knock-on effect on the public section that disrupts its ability to protect.

I would like to look at two agreements, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and then briefly at one new area with no agreement, the Net. Under the MAI multinationals can sue national governments for profits lost through laws which discriminate against them. This agreement puts at risk a whole range of issues from workplace legislation, to environmental decisions, and it was difficult to resist signing up to if you want investment. The prospect seemed so distant that the MAI was voted number one on the list of least-known important facts for 1998, but a similar structure is basically in place in NAFTA, and it may be because of this example that a number of small organisations managed to dislodge the MAI in late 1988. This action prefigured the recent protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in November and December 1999.

NAFTA brings together Canada, the United States and more recently Mexico, and runs into problems because of the large number of powerful multinationals that operate out of the States. Under NAFTA, for example, public sector programmes must compensate the private enterprise they put out of business before they can proceed. So, for example, if a municipal council wants to set up a local nursery, they must compensate the private enterprise nurseries for lost income before they even start trying to fund the programme itself. There are many environmental examples, such as the United States' company which is suing the government over the exclusion of a chemical component in petrol which reduces engine wear and tear, but which is held by scientists to have a horrific effect on the environment.

The general result in Canada has been increasing job losses and falling incomes. One specific: a substantial decrease in encouragement for Canadian cultural products, a result in literature from the many take-overs of small publishing houses by United States' companies. Unusually, Canada is the only nation where the employment of women has fallen over the past 10 years, as service sector workers in data management and factory workers in clothing manufacture in particular, have experienced redundancies. Both agreements weaken the ability of any group to assert political influence. Negotiations about trade and finance are carried out and implemented by un-elected bodies, so there is no democratic debate. Despite the fact that an increasing number of large companies now have an 'ethical' policy, these too are decided on behalf of others not in discussion with them.

But let's look at the more intensely global world of the internet, which we should remember largely excludes Africa, and many other places. With more and more business of buying and selling done on the Web, how will governments tax? how will profits be assessed? The predicted effect on areas like pension funds is potentially enormous, but the public sector will be bound to suffer if national governments have less income. Yet at the moment there is no international agreement on procedure. A multinational may sort out responsibilities to the people in the company, to the people in the workplace, to the people around the workplace, to their subsidiaries, to consumers, to the countries in which they sell their goods. But Net business, e-commerce, is not necessarily like this. If you engage in any transaction as a consumer, it is often difficult to find out where the goods have come from, if the company is 'green', if the workplace is responsibly managed. On the Net it can be virtually impossible to do so.

Where does the ethical responsibility of a company trading entirely on the Net, worldwide, lie? Even if it wanted to, with whom should it debate, agree to grounds, decide and so on, with. This is a really difficult ethical problem, for which Mr Hutton's suggestions about global trading structures, authorities with responsibility, and a global civic society offer at least a starting point.

3. Ethics and the Media: Fact, Fiction or Spin?

James Naughtie and Professor Lynette Hunter

Both James Naughtie and Lynette Hunter chose, within the huge topic of Ethics and the Media, to think about the relations of the media with politics and government, thus carrying on the main element from the two previous lectures. And both raised issues of trust, and possibly risk. We don't trust our politicians, we don't trust big business, but do we trust the newsmedia? In a more pointed way: Do we want to be told what we already believe? What do we expect of the media? Do the tabloids have too much power? and the simple but constant everyday question: Do we believe everything we read or hear or see in the newsmedia, and if not, how do we make up our minds about it?

This transcript offers an outline of Mr. Naughtie's presentation, given first at the lecture, and a fuller account of Professor Hunter's.

James Naughtie:

Today is the 30th anniversary of the *Sun* newspaper. It thinks itself the still point of a turning world, the lodestar to which all politicians turn - and they do. From the 1979 backing of Mrs Thatcher, the *Sun* which had previously been a Labour paper, took its readership into the right wing. This had a huge impact on the Conservative Party as well as on the Labour Party, for what it said to Labour was not simply that it had failed to understand the population of Britain, but that it had failed to understand how to deal with the media.

If Morgan Rees was the lynchpin between that Conservative Party and the papers, the first 'spin doctor', it was Alistair Campbell, Labour's current spin doctor, who persuaded the *Sun* to turn round to Labour for the last election. And such is the power of the relationship, that commentary on politics has become skewed to a ludicrous degree to an emphasis on presentation.

Spin doctors, like spies, become mere shadows of themselves when we notice what they are doing. So we need to talk about them, lampoon them. At the same time they become an obsession, like the companies that are enthralled to management consultants distrusting the training of their staff, politicians who may have good ideas and excellent strategies, don't believe they are real until they find them repeated in the media. But it is really in the nature of the influence they exert that they become a problem.

The nature of control within current politics is extensive, and works with a rigid view of black and white, good and bad. The result is a cowed and cowardly media world, and a kind of caricature-politics, built on extremes rather than explanation. An interesting example of spin going wrong might be the tos and fros around Ken Livingstone in his bid to be mayor of London. The attempts to keep him from being selected have become more and more obvious, the spin has revealed itself and is now a problem.

There are three main issues that have emerged from the culture of 'spin':

- 1) when politicians are obsessed by presentation they conceal good ideas, and this is bad for democracy.
- 2) because of constant opinion-polling and focus groups, the agenda can get twisted. For example, a politician questioned about the 'rural crisis' said that there was no rural crisis, because it hadn't arisen at a focus group.
- 3) it is dangerous for parliament because power becomes more closed-in and inaccessible.

What we need is more flexibility in relations between the media and politicians, more intellectual engagement and a much more discursive culture.

Professor Lynette Hunter

A fertile, responsive, democratic ethics has to grow out of discussion, agreement to the grounds of debate, decisions and actions. This engaged sense of ethics has been central to my earlier discussions in the series where I raised issues of access to that process and representation within it. I also looked at the way that 'rights' lose their legitimacy as they lose their responsive mode and become fossilised 'standards', those do-it-yourself ethical guides where the title says it all: don't involve ethics. Which is of course anathema to ethics.

To complement James Naughtie's discussion I'd like to focus this time on grounds. Any discussion in ethics, any ethical discussion, has to sort out the parameters of the event, agree on which things take priority and why.

If you go into an ethical debate with pre-set grounds, you're not doing your work. You're allowing previous experience (that may or may not be appropriate, but you should certainly sort out which) to set the stage.

You're on the way to fossilisation. Another way of looking at this is to ask, who controls the agreement to grounds? is it consensual, conversational, corporate, authoritarian? What is the mechanism? Why wasn't the 'rural crisis' raised in any of the focus groups?

If we look first at politics and the newsmedia, we run immediately into the Alistair Campbell issue, the one mediator. Government used to have more of them, even in the early years of the current labour government both Brown and Blair had a publicity representative, but now there is one. And unlike the diminishing figures in the nursery rhyme, the power of this 'one' has got greater and greater. Why? because he has the power to control the scope of the grounds on which we come to our decisions. Yes, they are mediated by journalists, but that initial power is far more important than whether a journalist offers you an opinion you agree with or not. If you understand the grounds you can assess the opinion.

At least in Campbell's case it is obvious: Goebbels' masterstroke for Nazi Socialism was to disguise the fact that decisions were made by very small numbers of people, often by one person. This is not the 'divide and rule' principle, where you encourage people into differences so there can be no solidarity. More cleverly, it works on a pyramid system, now a classic sales device, that teaches people to think the same way but think they are different. Of course, there are no fundamental differences so, surprise, surprise, they agree.

Just so, we could take big business and the newsmedia, and take on the Murdoch factor, the one owner. Business was pretty big at the turn of the twentieth century when the Harmondsworths and Pearsons of this world effectively killed off the 'editor' and put the 'advertiser' in king-position. But the business of the media is even bigger now that it's global. That Blair has to court the media is a serious problem partly because it involves him in courting big business. Murdoch can define many of the grounds for our discussions in politics and elsewhere. It can be called 'editorial policy' but effectively when there's a crunch issue, the owner can call the shots, as Murdoch did on the Euro.

But at least it's fairly obvious, and the general public are getting better at realising what is happening. If we turn the tables around a bit and look at the way the newsmedia control politicians (and to some extent big business), by running them into some scoop: is this ethical or is it exploitation. The newsmedia follow politicians everywhere to an unprecedented extent, and without exception.

Peter Hennessy, during the first lecture of this series, was comparing the journalism of the 1970s with that today and commenting on the way that only 20 years ago you might 'know things' about someone, but unless you wrote for a tabloid you sat on that knowledge until it was blown by someone else and you might have to use it.

More subtly the ubiquity of the newsmedia reduces politicians to the 'one-line' mentality. The history of politics reminds us that politicians used to be skilled in speaking to different kinds of audiences in different ways. Certainly this could lead to a sense of 'He'll say anything to anyone', but at its centre it's about the necessity of speaking in different ways to different people. Now that politicians cannot afford to be accused of anything remotely like a contradiction, now that debate is so seriously curtailed, people aren't interested in listening to them. In contrast, a lot of local politics the debate is still vigorous. Another effect of the newsmedia arises from its speed. This is a complex area, but a simple example would be the way that if someone says something, because it is immediately widely known, it has to be dealt with immediately. There is little time for reflection, for discussion. And a third effect comes from the need for politicians to be verbally, visually, aurally competent in the medium

that they appear. An honest person may hum and haw, confess partial ignorance, and the newsmedia will make a meal of them - they will come across as untrustworthy.

The effects of the media are less obvious. And our ethical interaction with it is different to that with politics and business. For example, despite the influential exploitation of sleaze that the newsmedia have encouraged, it is intriguing that we rarely question the sleaze-factor of the reporter.

Why? I suspect it is because we accept that the politician and business person has effective power, and feel that journalists don't. But of course they do. We are less used to thinking in this way than we are about politics and business, and the media know better how to cover up the tracks. After all, they know how mediation works.

But none of this is simply reactive. Part of the larger question of the ethics of the newsmedia is that the relation is also effected by the consumer. Will they buy the paper, switch on the programme? These questions dictate a lot about the grounds the media choose. But do the media simply blow with the wind? When does a paper or programme decide to take a stand?

There is also the very complicated factor that readers/viewers/listeners have different skills of response. Much discussion hovers around whether the tabloids brutalise the reader, or whether they are at heart recognised and read as ironic products. Is the adoration of the royalty also parodic?

And what about the pornography/erotica debate? Possibly more difficult: is an excellent report on poverty in schools a) a revealing and important catalyst for social change? or b) a prurient and self-satisfied middle-class interest in conditions of people the reader would never speak to? The 'Thank goodness I'm better off than that' response? We should at least be able to find the vocabulary to discuss these questions, but a deep-rooted distrust of the media usually obscures the need to do so.

We seem to accept that no medium can hand us the 'truth' about events, and this is by definition for the media mediate, they can never give us the event 'as it is'. And we deal with 'fiction' in a different way than events in our world. So what do we expect of the media? At least responsible discussion, which I would argue is defined partly by the clarity of knowing who is controlling the grounds. Constantly, these days, we are aware of the power of the person or institution who controls the grounds. It's called 'spin'. But spin has always happened. A large part of rhetoric for 2500 years has been spin. And spin, like propaganda, can be ethical or unethical. We don't necessarily know what is the 'good' way to act, we have to learn it. Partly we perceive unethical spin when we disagree with its presentation - when we say 'that's a lie'. Sometimes it's when we feel that it jeopardises someone unfairly, it's irresponsible. Or, more seriously, an action is seen as unethical when what led up to it is controlled without any discussion.

I want to conclude by asking, do we only want spin or rhetoric in the newsmedia when it gives us back what we already believe in? How much are we prepared to risk and on what basis would we change an opinion? Do we want to be protected from falsehood, a freedom from? or do we want the opportunity to sort out what the best interpretation of the case is? What makes one more appropriate than the other and how is one facilitated better? How can we tell the difference?

In the immediate moment it's the personality of the delivering end of the media that will affect 99.99% of the response, the ethos of the speaker.

And although especially younger people are becoming highly sophisticated at unpicking the layers of obscurity that lie around the ethos, the distrust of the newsmedia - the fear, blame, prurient interest, scoop mentality - comes from opacity, not being able to see who really controls the ground, or how that control is effected, and even more, not being able to engage.

We need more guidelines from the media, but more important than that, we need better public access to those in place.

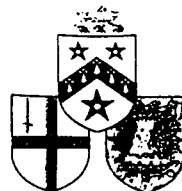
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- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
- to challenge those who live or work in the City of London to engage in intellectual debate on those subjects in which the City has a proper concern; and to provide a window on the City for learned societies, both national and international.



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