Making the News

Over the years, the conference season has provided British political parties with unique opportunities to advertise themselves for free under the cover of “news”. Throughout the year parties compete with each other for the attention of the media but every autumn, for about a month, a tacit convention temporarily suspends the normal rules of political balance. Provided that there is no other pressing news to cover, the media focus their attention upon the current conference and do not seek alternative opinions from other parties. What has been the role of the media in the transformation of conferences from semi-private events into public showrooms? To a large extent, most of the changes have been introduced with an eye on the image of the party and a concern for the ways in which the leadership could remain in control of its communication.

In the 1950s, rows of printed press journalists could be seen next to the stage, frantically taking down notes to publish nearly verbatim accounts. From the 1960s to the early 1980s, conference debates were covered in detail though no longer in extenso. By the late 1990s, coverage has shrunk in square centimetres and photographs have become a prominent feature. The content also evolved. Whilst broad sheets still devote several pages to conferences, they focus on keynote speeches rather than delegates’ interventions. Debates are summarised and political comment has taken on increasing importance alongside nuggets of news about the fringe and the backstage. TV cameras first appeared at party conferences in 1954 and terrestrial channels soon started broadcasting the main conferences live for several hours a day. “Pre-TV blood didn’t matter,” argues Austin Mitchell. “Indeed, once in the 1950s, secret policy discussion, from which the press had been excluded were broadcast live to a bemused sea front in Eastbourne.
Someone forgot to switch the external speakers off” (Mitchell, 2000: 114). Until the 1970s, exposure did not significantly alter the direction of conferences. By the end of the decade, party leaderships became aware of the need to manage their organisations’ image.\(^5\)

In the last decade of the 20th century, the world of media became much more diverse and segmented than before thanks to three factors: the development of new electronic technologies, the deregulation of the telecommunications market and the concentration of media ownership by large corporations. Although private and public broadcasters have co-existed in Britain since the creation of ITV in 1955, the introduction of cable and satellite channels and the launch of Sky Television in 1989 (now BSkyB) has transformed the “media landscape”. New technologies have contributed to the multiplication of media outlets (from private television and radio channels to the Internet and a host of specialised magazines and newsletters). Twenty-four-hour news channels and targeted media have notably affected how and how much journalists cover political issues. Both print and audio-visual media are now driven by concerns about market share and are involved in a ferocious competition for audiences. Debates about the transformation of mass media in Britain often revolve around “tabloidisation” of the media and the related marginalisation of political news.\(^6\) Tabloid newspapers have not reduced their political news coverage but have contributed to the personalisation of politics and the domination of sound-bites. Moreover, there has been a diversification and segmentation of information outlets (Norris, 2000: 70–73). Whilst political parties can potentially reach new and diverse audiences, they have less control over the message they can convey.

Although it is impossible to gauge the direct influence of conference on an individual party’s image,\(^7\) political elites grew convinced that conference could be extremely beneficial if well directed or catastrophic if out of control. Moreover, they believed that the media had the power to sway voters’ opinions\(^8\) because it could set the public agenda. The conviction that the media plays a crucial role in directing voters’ opinion is not new: agenda-setting theory was first proposed in 1972 (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This argued that the top stories on the mass media news agenda were correlated with those on the public agenda. The implication was that the media could influence what people talked about and thought about, if not necessarily how they thought about it. Because most people in contemporary liberal democracies make sense of politics through the media, the role of communication outlets is probably more important than ever. Moreover, the media can also