Jay Blumler: A Founding Father of British Media Studies

James Curran

Introduction

Jay Blumler was a pioneer researcher into the media before media studies became part of the British university repertoire. He was an institution builder, as the director of the Leeds University Centre for Television Research – the progenitor of the University of Leeds’ celebrated Institute of Communications Studies – and as a co-founder of the influential European Journal of Communication, established in 1984. However, his principal claim to fame is that his publications, spanning half a century, have influenced the development of media studies both in Britain and internationally.

Three aspects of Blumler’s background are worth highlighting since they have a bearing on the nature of the influence he has exerted. A political science graduate from Antioch University, Blumler was familiar with pioneering US communications studies. When he prepared for his interview for the post of the Grenada Television Research Fellow at the University of Leeds in 1963, he turned instinctively to the standard overview of US media effects research (Klapper, 1960). One key way in which Blumler influenced the development of British media studies was to import insights from the United States.

Second, Jay Blumler was – and remains – a committed social democrat. The son of radical parents, he travelled to the London School of Economics in 1947 to do postgraduate research under the supervision of Harold Laski, a leading theoretical exponent of radical pluralism (Hirst, 2005) and chairman of the British Labour Party in the 1945 general election. Blumler then went on to teach for 14 years at Ruskin College, the worker and adult education institution affiliated to Oxford University. During this period, Blumler became a Labour Party activist...
and intellectual, aligned with the Gaitskellite wing of the party. Blumler’s strongly held ethical social democratic outlook emphasised social solidarity, public deliberation and the pursuit of a wider public interest above private interests. These values shaped his work, and led him to become a leading exponent of a centre-left tradition of political communication research.

Third, Blumler is a citizen of two nations. He is an expatriate American who has lived in Britain for much of his adult life, and married a British woman. Yet, he retains strong ties to the United States, speaks with a soft American accent, and in the latter part of his career combined a post at Maryland University with that at Leeds. This dualism encouraged him to resist the national introversion of media research in both Britain and America, and to adopt a comparative approach that was profoundly influential.

The best way to examine Blumler’s place in the formation of British media studies is to consider selectively some of his key publications. Situating these in the context of their time helps to illuminate both their intellectual provenance and wider significance. We will begin with Blumler’s first book published in 1968, seven years before the first ‘media studies’ degree was introduced in Britain.

Audience power

An academic legend has grown up that the once popular perception of media audiences as dupes was only demolished by cultural studies reception research in the 1980s (for example, Morley, 1992). In fact, this perception was debunked in Britain by Jay Blumler and his associates long before. They were drawing in turn upon a rich tradition of American audience research extending back to a brilliant (and elegantly written) study of the media’s influence on the 1940 Presidential election (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

However, this corpus of American work was not widely known in Britain during the 1960s. Instead a celebrated book by the American journalist, Vance Packard, called Hidden Persuaders, which invoked an alarming picture of the conditioning impact of subliminal messages embedded in advertising, and of the omnipotence of new political public relations techniques, was still being lauded in Britain (Packard, 1957/1967). Another more crafted and insightful work, Richard Hoggart’s The Uses of Literacy, which portrayed a hyper-commercialized, candyfloss media as culturally depriving and emotionally enfeebling, was then the best known treatise on the media (Hoggart, 1957). Both books, and others