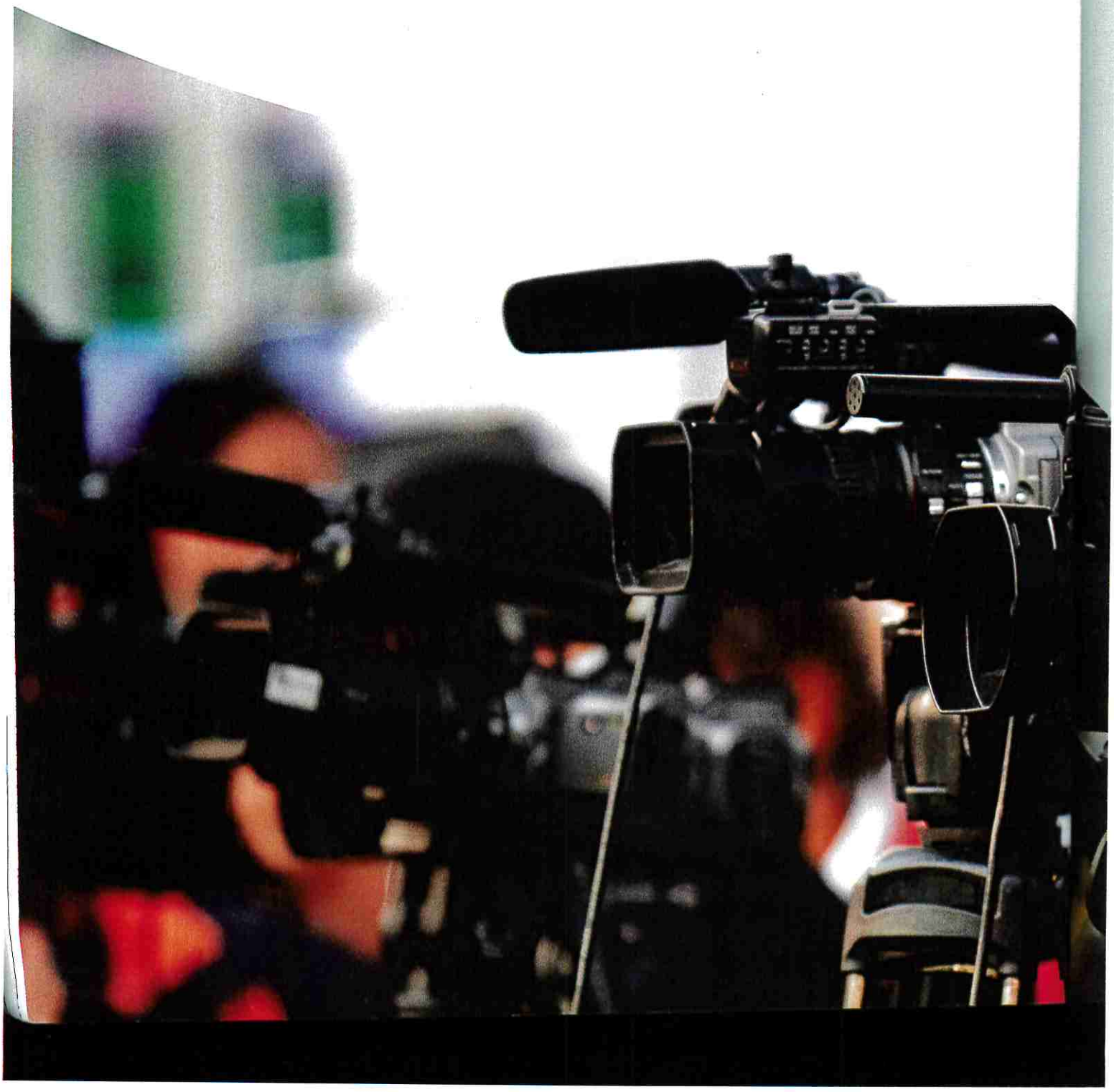
THE MEDIA

6



Chapter Preview

During day-to-day life most people are not working in government or politics nor do they engage directly with politicians. The majority rely on the mass media to access the political information they need to form their own opinions, while politicians rely on the media as the main tool of communication between government and the people.

Because the mass media provides most people with the images, ideas and information to understand politics, this raises the question of who owns and controls the media. If ownership is concentrated in the hands of the few, then they may wish to use this power to push their own political agenda. Even if power is concentrated, the power and influence of the media to change voting behaviour is seen by some to be limited as voters are not simply empty vessels waiting to be filled by whatever messages the media send their way. It may be that the power and influence of the media is more in shaping the political debate to reflect the interests of the powerful and privileged in society: the rich over the poor, businesses over workers, the able over the disabled, male over female, the older over the young and white over ethnic minorities.

Since 2000, the nature of the media has radically transformed in the UK, with the traditional media of newspaper and television being challenged. The arrival of digital TV has seen an explosion in the number of channels available while internet and mobile technology has brought about the emergence of online platforms, including social media, as a key source of news.

The increased competition alongside 24/7 up-to-date news and opinion has changed the way that news is produced and consumed. New technology has the chance to democratise the media by giving a voice to the powerless and those previously excluded by the press and TV. It means that there is now a far greater choice and variety of media news sources available to the public than ever before. The flip side to this is the threat to democracy from fake news, where false stories are deliberately made to look like authentic news and are spread online to influence political attitudes. Increased competition has also seen media outlets scrambling for readers and viewers, leading, according to some, to the dumbing down of politics, which has been linked to the growth of disillusionment and apathy.

Key Questions and Debates

- How has the nature of the media changed in the UK?
- What is the importance and relevance of opinion polls to UK democracy?
- What is the extent of the influence of the media on politics and what impact does political bias play in our politics?
- How effective is the media in supporting democratic politics and representing the public interest?

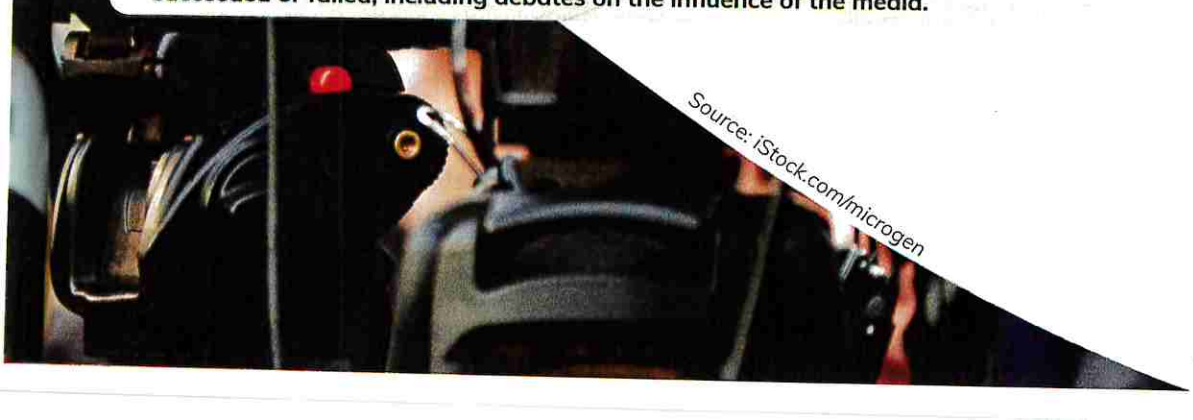
Specification Checklist

4.2. The influence of the media

- **The assessment of the role and impact of the media on politics – both during and between key general elections, including the importance and relevance of opinion polls, media bias and persuasion.**

2.4. UK political parties in context

- **Various factors that affect party success – explanations of why political parties have succeeded or failed, including debates on the influence of the media.**



Source: iStock.com/microgen

The changing nature of the media

Definition

Traditional media: Any form of mass communication that existed before the digital age and includes television, radio, newspapers and magazines.

New media: The forms of mass communication that use digital technologies such as the internet.

Social media: Forms of communication that allow people to create and share content and to build networks and communities online.

What is the media?

The media comprises those societal institutions that are concerned with the production and distribution of all forms of knowledge, information and entertainment. The **traditional media** includes the broadcast media (television and radio) and the print media (newspapers and magazines), which has been challenged and transformed by the arrival of the **new media**, which includes a vast array of online platforms, including **social media**.

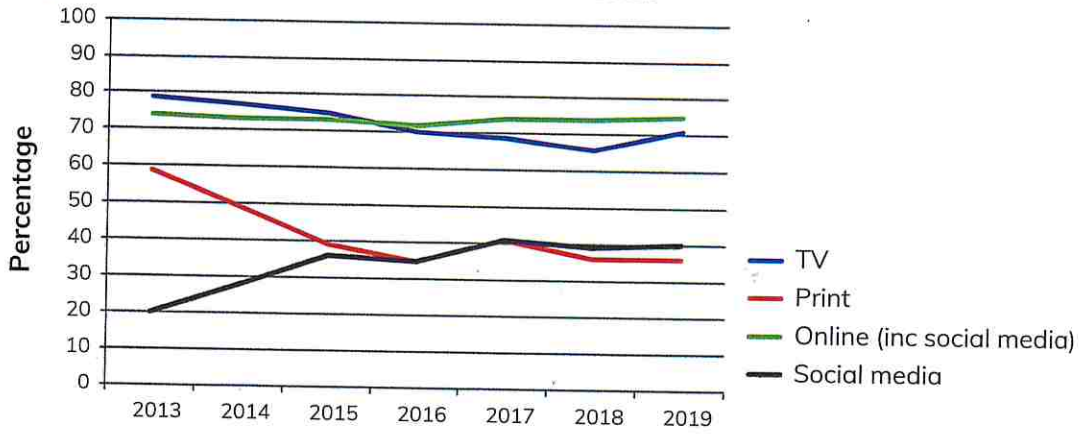
How has the nature of the media evolved?

The media has been recognised as politically significant since the advent of mass literacy and the popular press in the late nineteenth century. Until the post-war period, the print media was the most important way that the public could access the news, current affairs or views that helped explain the world they lived in. Newspapers are privately owned, free from government control and able to clearly express their partisan views by supporting a particular political party or taking a clear position on an issue of public importance. This gives rise to the criticism that a small number of press barons (newspaper owners) could exercise very real influence on public affairs.

After the Second World War, the press faced competition in the form of the broadcast media with the birth of television. The key difference here was that the broadcast media was expected to be impartial by considering a broad perspective and ensuring that a range of views was appropriately reflected. This means that the broadcast media, unlike the press, cannot support a particular party or express a view on current affairs or matters of public policy.

Since 2000, the acceleration of technological change has transformed the media, with a vast array of television channels, the 24-hour news cycle, the internet with its abundance of sources for news and information (many of which are free) and social media such as Twitter and Facebook. This is changing the way that the public is accessing the news (see Figure 6.1). In particular, the focus falls on the importance of television as the key source of political news and information in competition with online news sources, the rising importance of social media and the continued decline in the readership of the print media.

Figure 6.1 Sources of news from 2013 to 2019



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019. Reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License.

By its nature, much of politics, policy making and public consultation is lengthy, dull and not a natural fit with an increasingly diverse and highly competitive media world which has to produce stories 24 hours a day. The competition in the media leads to a disproportionate focus on negative stories, in particular about the private lives of politicians and the worst elements of party politics, in the drive for more consumers. Critics argue that this has cheapened political communication

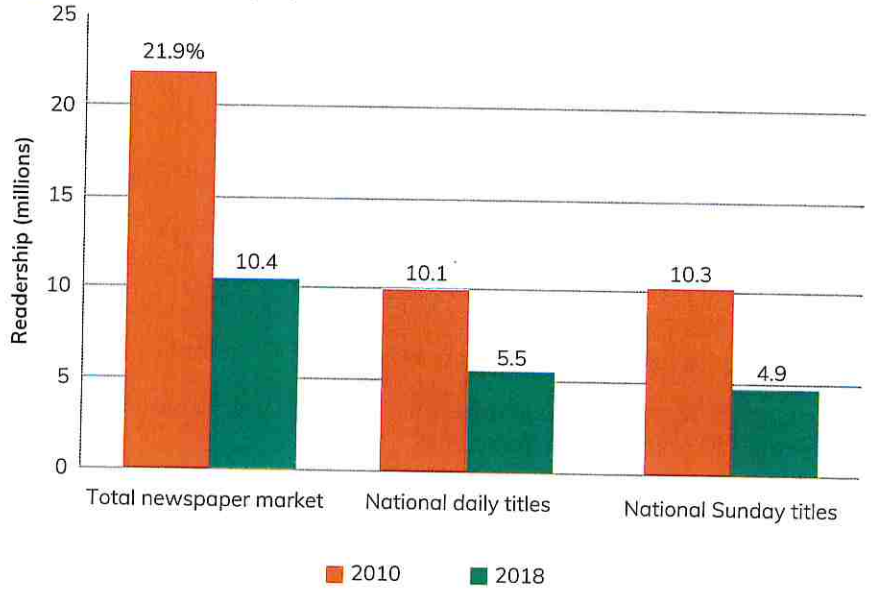
and trivialised politics rather than providing the analysis and reporting that will inform the public about political news. It raises the question of whether such media communication is creating an increasingly negative attitude toward both politicians and political institutions in the UK, leading to apathy and disillusionment, and ultimately lower voter turnout.

KEY TOPIC DEBATE: ARE TRADITIONAL MEDIA SOURCES NOW BECOMING INCREASINGLY IRRELEVANT?

The print media

The traditional print media has been struggling in the UK, with the decline in the circulation of printed papers leading to a collapse in revenue (see Figure 6.2). The overall readership of the print media declined from 21.9 million in 2010 to 10.4 million in 2018; an overall fall of 52.5%. Within that fall, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* remain the two best-selling daily newspapers while roughly 1 in 4 newspaper readers uses daily free sheets, like the *Metro* and *Evening Standard*, which can be picked up at train and bus stations.

Figure 6.2 Average newspaper circulation



Source: *News Consumption in the UK: 2019 Report* © Ofcom.

The consequences for the industry have been clear. For example, the *Independent* newspaper ceased all print editions to become online only in 2016, while 238 local newspapers shut between 2005 and 2017. While this seems to signal a real decline for the print media, the average daily readership for newspapers in the UK shows that papers still have considerable reach. The market (see Table 6.1) remains dominated by a small number of daily papers (with linked Sunday titles) and in many ways the range of newspaper choice is closely linked to the British class system:

- The readership of *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *Financial Times* is mostly drawn from the higher socioeconomic classes.
- The *Mail* and *Express* draw their readership from across all the groups.
- *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Star* draw most of their readership from the working classes.
- 58% of those over 65 used printed newspapers as a source of news, while this figure dropped to 20% for those in the 16 to 24 age category. This does not make for good news for the printed press in the long term and suggests that a decline in readership will be a permanent feature of the future of the industry.

Table 6.1 Monthly circulation figures for major daily papers

Daily Papers	Total circulation, February 2020	Year-on-year change (%)
Metro Free	1,419,614	0
The Sun	1,206,595	–11
Daily Mail	1,134,184	–4
Evening Standard Free	787,447	–8
Daily Mirror	441,934	–10
The Times	359,960	–11
Daily Express	289,679	–8
Daily Star	274,808	–15
I	215,932	–7
Financial Times	155,009	–10
The Guardian	126,879	–5
Daily Record	103,222	–12

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC).Newspapers also have a reach that is differentiated by voter groups. According to the OFCOM survey in 2019:

» In terms of class, 41% of ABC1 class categories access printed papers as a source of news, while this figure dropped to 34% for those in the C2DE class groupings (see Chapter 5, Table 5.1 for categories of social class in the UK). This is particularly important given the higher levels of voter turnout in the over-65s and in the ABC1 categories.

Issues facing the print media

It is not simply the case that the decline in readership of printed newspapers means the end of the print industry. Rather, it means its transformation:

» The major newspapers have all adapted and moved online, operating with different financial models: *The Times* operates a paywall model where you need to subscribe, *The Guardian* looks to its readers for financial contributions, while most papers, like *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, use a free content model and look to recoup their money from advertisers. Many papers have seen a large growth in online readership (see Figure 6.3), and so in some ways can be seen to have extended their reach and potential influence. These websites are set up in direct competition to broadcasters' websites like the BBC, and online-only publications.

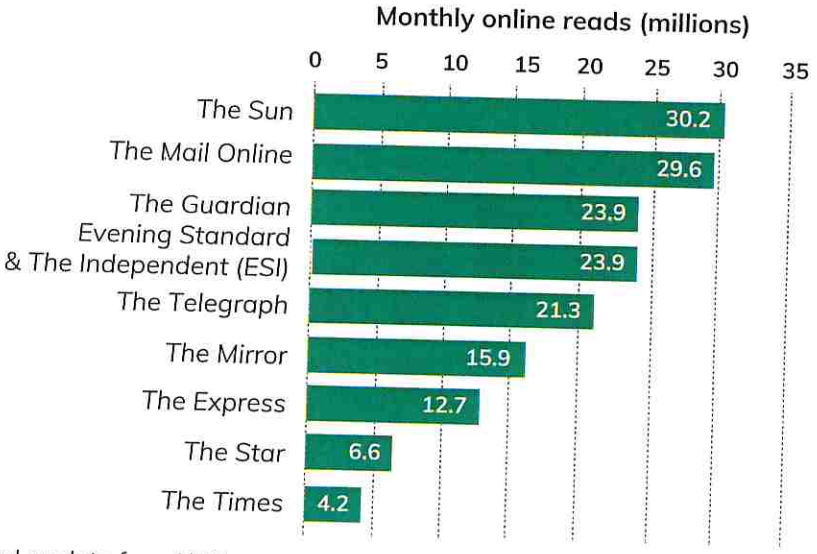
» Newspapers have also developed a close relationship with social media, with papers feeding off stories in social media and social media feeding off stories in the mainstream press. Many journalists and papers have strong online presences, using social media to post stories as they happen and to get people to click through to their paper's online site.

The other big issue facing the print media is declining trust, which has been particularly problematic since 2011. During the Coalition Government between 2010 and 2015, a long-running scandal about the use of private detectives by newspapers and their possible illegal activities to acquire news stories exploded. In 2011, *The Guardian* reported that the *News of the World* had hacked the mobile phone of the murdered teenager Millie Dowler. This led Cameron to call an inquiry under Lord Leveson into the culture, ethics and practices of the press due to the public revulsion at what had happened. The *Leveson Report* was published in 2012, and called for stronger regulation of the press by a new independent body backed by legislation. This new body has not been set up. It was argued by the print media to be too close to state control of the press so the print media instead operates a system of self-regulation.

Visit the companion website for a case study on phone hacking and the Leveson Inquiry.

Finally, the *Cairncross Review: A Sustainable Future for Journalism* (2019) found that the print media still plays a central role in the generation of news. Newspapers play a key role in financing original journalism, accounting for as much as broadcasting and online media put together. This has allowed the print media to reveal a huge number of public interest stories such as the Windrush Scandal and the MP's expenses scandal. The print media is still shaping the new agenda because broadcast media and social media are much more likely to carry stories that first appeared in the press rather than the other way round.

Figure 6.3 2017 monthly reads



Source: Based on data from NRS.

Broadcast media

The broadcast media includes both television and radio, with television remaining a key source of news for the British public as well as helping people to understand the political issues of the day. The broadcast media began in the UK as a state-sponsored service funded by a licence fee paid for by viewers and listeners. The BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation) was set up to operate at arm's length from the government so it could be seen as free of political interference. Under the BBC's Charter, it is expected to sustain citizenship and civil society, which obliges the BBC to give 'information about, and increase understanding of, the world through accurate and impartial news' and 'to promote understanding of the UK political system'.

Although the BBC monopoly was broken in the 1950s, there was only a slow increase in the number of commercial channels and radio stations, and these commercial stations had a statutory obligation to provide balanced political coverage, monitored by an independent authority. Since 2017, the BBC and all commercial stations are monitored by OFCOM (The Office of Communications), which is an independent regulator for communication services.

During the early years of television, the very small number of channels meant that most British families got their news at the same time and in the same way by watching or listening to the news together. In this way, a sense of national political culture was created and it was hard to avoid the news because it was not possible to switch over to another channel when it was on. Since the 2000s and the explosion of different channels and stations to choose from and the different ways

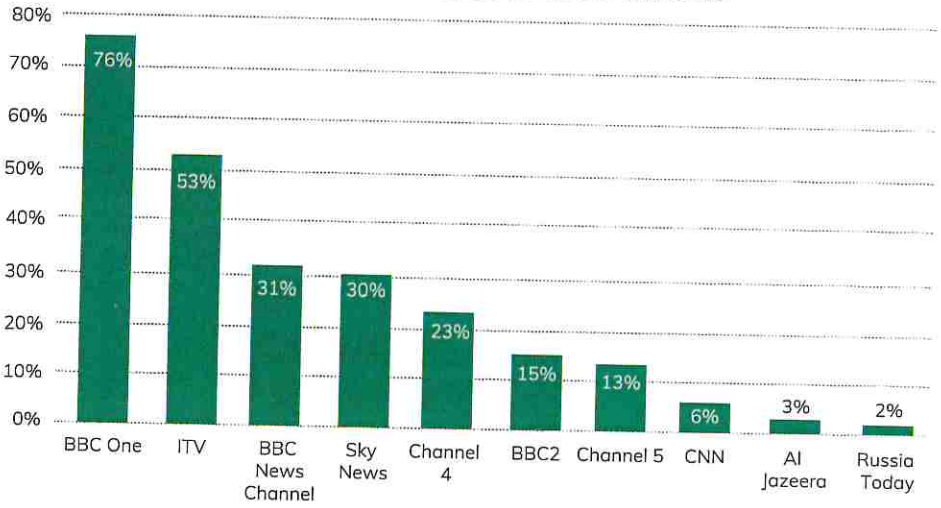
to access the news – TV, radio, phone, laptop, desktop and tablet – everyone can watch or listen to what they want. This means that people who are apathetic about politics can avoid political news and programming entirely, reducing the levels of political engagement and voter turnout in the UK.

Despite the huge increase in channels and stations, the broadcast media remains dominated by a small handful of broadcasters. The OFCOM review in 2019 (see Figure 6.4) of those adults who used television as a source of news found that:

» The BBC, ITV and its variants (STV in Scotland, ITV Wales and UTV in Northern Ireland) and Sky News were by far the most significant players.

» Within this small band of stations, the BBC remains by far the most popular broadcaster with 76% using BBC One for news. Within that, 55% of adults in the UK watch the BBC One News each week; however, this figure is down from 65% in 2010.

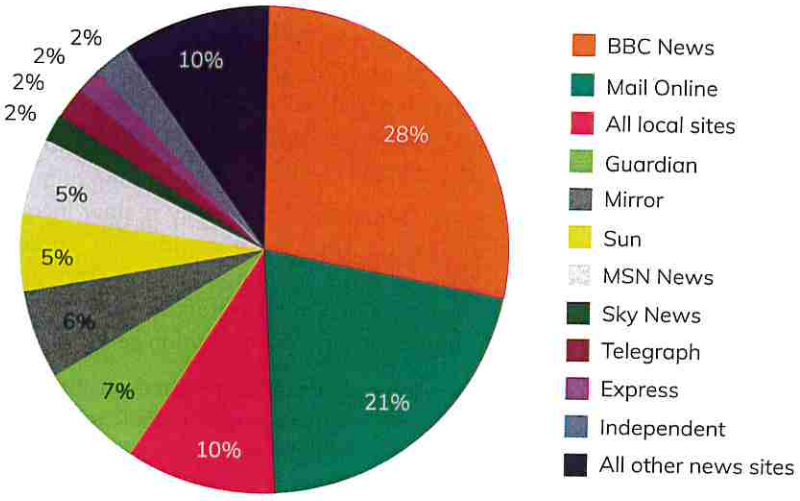
Figure 6.4 TV channels used as a source of news in 2019



Source: News Consumption in the UK: 2019 Report © Ofcom

While it appears that the BBC is losing viewers to competition from online sources, the BBC has transferred online and is the most used website and app in the UK for news, exceeding the number of monthly reads of either *The Sun* or the *Daily Mail*. In the 2019 election campaign, the role of the BBC website was very clear, accounting for 28% of all time spent on news sites during the campaign, while the Mail Online made up 21% (see Figure 6.5). This suggests the BBC has become a news platform across multiple media channels.

Figure 6.5 Time spent on online news sites in the 2019 election



Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Project 2020. Reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License.

Television remains important, with over 70% of people accessing it as a source of news. The reach of television is different across different audiences, according to the OFCOM *News Consumption in the UK: 2019* report:

- 94% of those over 65 use television as a news source compared to only 50% of those aged between 16 and 24.
- Television use is relatively consistent across different socio-economic groups; however, only 65% of minority ethnic adults compared to 77% of white adults use television to access the news.
- Replacing television, the internet is now the most used platform for news consumption among those aged 16–24 and those from a minority ethnic background.

Broadcast media and election campaigns

The importance of the broadcast media explains why the overwhelming focus of national election campaigns is on television coverage.

Manifestoes are launched, policy statements are made and meetings and rallies are held. Leading politicians give frequent interviews and visit factories, hospitals and schools across the UK to raise their public profile. They do this not only to hear from members of the public but, crucially, in the hope of gaining television exposure, with speeches that are tailored and events timed and carefully staged for this purpose. The soundbite takes centre stage, with short, clear and memorable phrases, such as 'Get Brexit Done' and 'Strong and Stable' taking the place of meaningful communication and answering the question. The fixation on the private lives of politicians, the confrontational interview approaches adopted by TV journalists and the constant repetition of soundbites irrespective of the question contribute very little to educating and informing the public. This 'dumbing down' of politics has encouraged a general distrust of politicians and the political process, increasing disillusionment and apathy.

One of the key effects of the dominance of television in election campaigns is the growth of celebrity politics, with media coverage focusing far more on party leaders rather than their parties. Television has undoubtedly altered the style of election campaigning, helping, in the process, to elevate personality and image over policies and ideas. The result is that electoral success, such as the Tory victory in 2019, is claimed as a personal mandate for the party leader and used to increase the power of the Prime Minister over their Cabinet, party and Parliament.

Social media

Since 2013, social media has risen quickly in its importance as a source of news in the UK. The rise of social media is a challenge to the BBC and the dominance of media communication by a small number of key players. It promotes communication between large numbers of people, opening up debate and allowing for the voices of all groups, especially those excluded from the mainstream media, to be heard.

One of the most important aspects of social media is not *how much* it is used, but *how* it is used. Most social media still users get the greatest proportion of their news from the main news organisations in the UK. Users click on article or video links from the main broadcast media websites or newspaper websites, with the BBC being the most followed news organisation in the UK on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Social media provides instant news by making any member of the public a reporter of an event as it happens, but the more detailed explanations of these events are still provided by the print and broadcast media. This suggests that social media is not really changing who the British public get their news from, just how they go about accessing it.

There are some interesting indicators to observe in how different demographic groups use social media (see Table 6.2).

- Facebook is the clear leader in terms of the most popular place to access the news, although Instagram and Twitter are becoming increasingly important.
- With the exception of Facebook, people from the 16–24 age group and the minority ethnic background group are more likely to use social media sites to access the news.

Table 6.2 How different demographic groups use social media

	Total population (%)	Age (%)		Social grouping (%)		Ethnic grouping (%)	
		16–24	65+	ABC1	C2DE	Minority ethnic	White
Facebook	73	65	62	71	75	64	75
Twitter	33	43	26	37	29	41	31
WhatsApp	30	31	10	32	27	48	25
Instagram	28	50	8	29	26	46	23
Snapchat	17	44	2	16	18	28	13

Source: News Consumption in the UK: 2019 Report © Ofcom.

Tip – This information can be used when writing about the voting behaviour of different demographic groups.

» The popularity of social media among young people provides a helpful means of encouraging them to register to vote. For example, in 2017 over 1.5m people under 35 registered to vote in the month from the date the election was called, and much of this was put down to online campaigns encouraging voter registration.

Problems associated with social media

Critics argue that information that is deliberately manipulated and intended to deceive and mislead people (**fake news**) can spread quickly and more widely through the use of social media and be used to influence the results of elections and referendums.

Definition

Fake news: The intentional creation and sharing of false information that aims to deceive or mislead. This information is then frequently spread on purpose or inadvertently.

» The rising concern in the spread of fake news included allegations about its impact on the EU Referendum 2016 and the 2017 General Election:

- In the 2016 Brexit Referendum, the Remain camp argued that there were misleading claims made by Leave campaigners over Turkey joining the EU.
- In the 2017 election, *The Sun* argued there were misleading claims made by Labour campaigners about the Tories planning to privatise the NHS.

» This led the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee in the House of Commons to launch a formal investigation in 2017 and it reported back in February 2019.

» The DCMS Committee concluded that: 'Democracy is at risk from the malicious and relentless targeting of citizens with disinformation and personalised "dark adverts" from unidentifiable sources, delivered through the major social media platforms we use every day.'

Tip – Look to highlight the differences between the different types of media but also reference how the lines between social media and the more traditional print and broadcast media have become blurred.

» The technology giants can generate profiles of voters based on their preferences, and campaigning organisations can buy advertising that uses those profiles to match the message to the right people at the right time in a campaign. Dark adverts are usually targeted to appeal to the prejudices and fears of voters, and the lack of regulation of social media added to the lack of transparency over who was spending what, to target whom and how, means that much of this part of politics is shrouded in a fog. This issue was turbocharged by the 2018 scandal where it came to light that Cambridge Analytica (a British political consulting firm) harvested personal information from Facebook without authorisation in early 2014 to build a system that could profile individual US voters in order to target them with personalised political advertisements. AIQ, a Canadian analytics firm, worked on digital advertising on behalf of the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 Referendum, bringing this issue into the context of the UK. when it was issued with an enforcement notice by the Information Commissioners Office in the UK under data protection law.

Key Debate Summary: Are traditional media sources now becoming increasingly irrelevant?

FOR	AGAINST
✓ Print media is in decline in the UK with readership continuing to fall.	✗ Print media is still dominated by a small number of papers with a wide readership while print media has transformed its business model to move online to maintain its readership.
✓ Print media has limited reach with younger voters and voters from the C2DE class groupings.	✗ Print media has much wider reach with older voters and voters from the ABC1 class categories, who have higher levels of voter turnout.
✓ The explosion in the number of channels and ways of accessing broadcast media means it is easier for people to avoid political news and people can get their news from a wider variety of sources.	✗ Broadcast media remains the most important source of political information for the UK public and continues to be dominated by a small number of stations.
✓ Broadcast media is being challenged by online media including social media, especially with younger voters and ethnic minority voters.	✗ Much of the broadcast media has moved online and the BBC is the most used site for UK news, maintaining its position of dominance.
✓ Since 2013, the influence of social media has risen rapidly, especially with younger voters.	✗ The influence of social media is exaggerated; it is just changing how the public accesses the news not who it gets its news from.

Opinion polls

What are opinion polls?

Opinion polls are an attempt, through sampling, to test either the opinions of the public on a certain issue or their voting intentions, with the key opinion polls in UK politics focusing on voting intentions in general elections.

The key types of polling used in the UK are:

» **Voting intention polls** to gauge how people intend to vote at any one time.

» **Policy issue polls** that assess people's views on issues that might relate to social policy or politics, such as views on the NHS, fox hunting or Brexit.

» **Private polls** that are commissioned by political parties, individuals and companies, where the results are only selectively released to the public, if at all.

» **Exit polls** which are conducted as voters leave the polling station. Exit polls show greater levels of accuracy than other types of polling.

Recently, exit polling has enjoyed a higher level of accuracy than the pre-election voting intention polls. The main difference between an exit poll and standard voting intention polls is that exit polls do not aim to measure how many people will vote for each party but rather aim to show how many seats each party will win. Exit polls showed that David Cameron would win a majority in 2015, that Theresa May would lose her majority in 2017 and that Boris Johnson would win with a large majority in 2019. With this in mind, the next section will focus on voting intention polls, private polls and policy issue polls.

Definition

Opinion polls: Provide a snapshot of opinion on a certain issue at a particular time and show how opinion on that issue has changed over time.

Voting intention polls: Measure which party a person might vote for in an election or which way they might vote in a referendum.

Policy issue polls: Measure people's views on a political or social issue.

Private polls: These are done on behalf of particular organisations and individuals where the results are released in part to the public, if released at all.

Exit polls: These are carried out as voters leave the polling station.

How do opinion polls work?

» Trained interviewers ask questions of people chosen at random from the population being measured.

» Responses are given, and interpretations are made based on the results.

» Polling companies, such as Ipsos MORI, YouGov and ComRes, aim to develop reliable techniques that filter out any bias in order to give results that are as accurate as possible.

» This involves sampling a large number of people, who are broadly representative of the social make-up of the population as a whole.

The importance of a reliable method was shown in 2015. An independent inquiry established by the British Polling Council found that polling companies spoke to too many likely Labour voters and not enough Conservative voters (specifically because they did not interview enough older people). This helped explain why between 2010 and 2015 polls had consistently overestimated the Labour vote and underestimated the Tory vote. This led polling companies to predict a hung parliament rather than the Conservative majority the election actually delivered.

Opinion polls are generally presented with a +/–3% margin for accuracy and this should be taken into account when reading the results. In 2016, when David Cameron called the EU Referendum, the 18 previous polls had shown that Remain had an average 3.4 percentage point lead over Leave. When the result came in, Leave had won the referendum by 3.8 percentage points, showing that the opinion polls were broadly within the margin of error, yet still got the result wrong.

KEY TOPIC DEBATE: DO OPINION POLLS HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON UK DEMOCRACY?

There are a number of key benefits to opinion polls in a democracy, built around increasing the quality of political communication within society. Opinion polls are particularly important because voting in elections is such an imperfect way of measuring public opinion. A vote for a party is seen as giving support for the party's manifesto, yet most voters are unaware of the fine print in the manifesto. A good example here would be the Poll Tax, which was a flat-rate tax set by local authorities to be paid by every adult to replace local rates, a tax calculated on the rental value of your house. It was included in the 1987 Tory manifesto, but when the policy was introduced, it was deeply unpopular and faced a huge backlash. A vote for a party can hardly be seen as agreeing to the whole manifesto (for example, a voter might agree with the tax policy but not the environmental policy).

Opinion polls plug this gap by providing an additional way of measuring the views of the public in order to keep parties on their toes by reminding them about what voters care about and think. There are five key benefits of opinion polls to democracy:

✓ **Political parties and governments use these opinion polls to help inform their decision-making process because they provide a sense of the mood and thoughts of the population, without holding an election or referendum.** As a result, governments can introduce or amend legislation and make decisions that they feel a large number of the public will support. Opinion polls allow political parties to design manifestoes and policies that are in tune with public opinion.

» The 2017 Labour manifesto chimed with policy issue polls that showed that the public backed renationalising the railways, freezing the retirement age and building thousands of council houses.

» The 2019 Tory manifesto chimed with policy issue polls with its focus of 'Get Brexit Done' and increased spending pledges on the police, NHS and education.

✓ **Opinion polls can encourage political participation and inform public debate. Where the media reports a close contest, as in 2017, this is more likely to encourage voters to turn out.**

» The voting intention polls were reported by the media as being close in 2010, 2015 and 2017, and all these elections showed an increase in turnout on the previous election.

✓ **Opinion polling gives people who do not usually have access to the media an opportunity to be heard instead of letting only politicians, parties or media companies speak on their behalf.** This is particularly important where the public's view may be out of step with the views of the political classes.

» Between 2016 and 2019, the political parties in the UK frequently found themselves out of step with the public over Brexit in policy issue polls.

✓ **The public, media and politicians all get access to accurate measures of public attitudes and voting intentions.** It stops the government from misrepresenting public opinion and gives credible sources to opposition parties, the public and the media to challenge the government. Newspapers and pressure groups often commission polls as part of their wider investigations into ongoing political issues.

» In 2012, the Coalition Government was forced to reverse a 3p rise in tax on fuel in response to pressure from motoring groups, industry leaders and backbench MPs that was backed up by private polling figures.

» In 2017, Theresa May was forced to reverse her policy to make elderly people pay more for their social care, nicknamed the 'Dementia Tax' by Labour, after her lead in the voting intention polls halved in a few days.

✓ **Political leaders can use polls to trace their level of electoral support between elections both for themselves and their party as well as understanding the impact of major events on public opinion.**

» The polling on the Covid-19 crisis has enabled the party leaders to see the impact of their handling of the situation on perceptions of their leadership and their parties.

The drawbacks of opinion polls in democracy

There are a number of major issues for opinion polls within democracy, which can all be tied to the issue of accuracy of voting intention polls in gauging public opinion and predicting the outcome of elections and referendums. This is not really a question of how statistically accurate polls are because the general accuracy of polling from 1942 onwards across countries has remained stable and this is an issue more for pollsters than the general public.

The real issue is the failure to predict the right result. In three of the last eight UK elections (1992, 2015, 2017), the polls have predicted the result incorrectly, as well as incorrectly predicting the result of the EU referendum. The impacts can be analysed in the following ways:

✗ **The impact on parties.** If voting intention polls help political leaders and parties make decisions, then incorrect polling can lead to getting those decisions wrong. It is also the case the political leaders and parties need to be responsive to policy issue polls, but also need to lead by making and winning arguments.

» When Theresa May made the decision on 17 April 2017 to call an election, the average Conservative lead over Labour in the polls was 17%. The final result was a 2.4% lead, with the Conservatives losing their majority in the Commons. Had the polls been accurate, would the Prime Minister have called an early election?

» Would David Cameron have included the promise of a Referendum in his 2015 manifesto had it not been for the polls predicting another hung parliament (given that another Coalition with the Liberal Democrats would have made a referendum impossible)?

» In 1978, the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, saw private polls that showed Labour would not perform well enough in marginal seats to secure a majority so he put the election off until 1979, where he suffered a comprehensive defeat to Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives.

» In 2012, the Chancellor, George Osborne, U-turned on a number of measures in his budget, including VAT on hot foods (the 'pasty tax'), VAT on static caravans, his plan to cap tax relief on charitable donations and the fuel tax rise, rather than making a strong case for his actions. This came to be known as the 'Omnishambles' Budget making the government look incoherent.

✗ **The impact on the media.** The media becomes obsessed with voting intention polls, and reporting focuses on a 'horse race style' commentary on who is winning the race rather than focusing on interrogating the issues and the policies that would educate and inform the public. If the polls are wrong, this leads to the whole media narrative becoming shaped by inaccurate information.

» A study by Cardiff University showed that in the last week of the 2015 election campaign, 22.7% of all media coverage was devoted to the potential winners and losers in the election, reducing the space for policy- and issue-based discussion.

The impact on the voter. Whether polls influence voting behaviour is a contested question. Some have argued that there is a 'bandwagon' effect, where information from polls can influence people to alter their view to come into line with the majority, and the 'underdog' effect, which will cause some people to adopt a minority view out of sympathy, but there is limited evidence to support either impact. It is also suggested that polling can lead to tactical voting, where voters use the polls to make a decision on who to vote for. This is widely rejected by polling companies, although it may have some local relevance in a constituency where the race is particularly close. The last impact is that where polling shows a close race, this is likely to lead to higher turnout, while polls that predict an easy victory for one party might reduce turnout.

Photo 6.1 2015 Conservative campaign poster showing Labour leader, Ed Miliband, in the pocket of SNP leader, Alex Salmond.



Source: Peter Macdiarmid /Getty Images.

» The voting intention polls predicted a landslide victory for Labour in 2001, the election with the lowest turnout for over 80 years.

The impact on elections and referendums. The most important problem that faces opinion polls is that once they are published, they end up influencing the very facts (i.e. elections and referendums) that they are supposed to measure. This has led countries such as France, Spain and Italy to ban all opinion polling in the period before an election.

» The *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls*, commissioned by the British Polling Council and Market Research Society, stated that 'the expectation of a hung parliament in the final days and weeks of the campaign was so strong and widely held that the sense of shock and disbelief was palpable when the result of the exit poll was announced'.

» This expectation will have impacted on the campaign strategies of the parties, the line taken by the media and the attitudes of the public. 'Politicians and peers suggested that the polling inaccuracies had affected the outcome of the election, speculating that Labour might have done better had the polls been accurate'.

» The polling inaccuracies led the Tories to lead with a campaign that played on the fears of Labour taking power with the support of the SNP as a coalition government (see Photo 6.1: 2015 Conservative campaign poster). This may well have triggered middle class voters in England to turn out and vote Tory in larger numbers than expected.

Key Debate Summary: Do opinion polls have a positive impact on UK democracy?

FOR	AGAINST
✓ Opinion polls provide a key channel for political communication, informing political parties about public opinion.	✗ Inaccurate polling can lead to political parties making the wrong decisions.
✓ Polling can inform public debate and facilitate voter engagement, especially when reported across the media.	✗ Where polling reflects a clear victory for one side this can have a negative impact on voter turnout, while the resulting 'horse race style' media coverage shapes the narrative rather than focusing on issues and policies.

✓ Polls provide an accurate measure of public attitudes and voting intentions.	✗ Confidence in polls has been undermined by recent failures to predict the right result, while polls can be seen to shape politics rather than measure it.
✓ Opinion polls can help the media, opposition parties, campaigning groups and backbenchers hold the government to account over unpopular policies and decisions.	✗ While it is important that the government is responsive to opinion, the role of the political party in power is to make and win arguments not to just slavishly follow the polls.

The media and elections

The influence of the media

Claims that the media have affected, perhaps decisively, the outcome of elections have come not least from the media themselves. Two days after the 1992 general election, for example, *The Sun* trumpeted 'It's the Sun wot won it'.

Despite the exaggeration involved in this claim and the lack of evidence to support it, it is difficult to deny that modern election campaigns are, in a very real sense, media campaigns. Only a tiny proportion of voters attend the election rallies or meet leaders or even Parliamentary candidates in the flesh during an election campaign. Instead, what most people know about the parties competing in an election, and the leading figures within those parties, they find out from television, newspapers or (to a lesser but growing extent) social media. The role of the media is also impacted by the increasing number of floating voters, who might be more open to media influence, and the apathetic voter, who is now able to entirely avoid the media's coverage of the political news.

Tip – The influence of the media can be compared and contrasted to the role that long-term (social) and short-term factors play in influencing voting behaviour.

Nevertheless, the central myth in discussions about the media's influence on voting and elections is that they have a direct, one-way impact on voters. In this highly simplistic view of media influence, voters are seen as empty vessels waiting to be filled by whatever messages the media send their way. In practice, voters not only already have attitudes and beliefs of various kinds shaped by social factors but are also subject to a range of other influences, including those of their family, their friends, work colleagues and so on. It is widely argued that these pre-established attitudes and beliefs (from wherever they may have come) act as a filter, or perceptual screen, that allows media messages to be interpreted in different ways, and, for that matter, to be accepted or rejected. A committed Conservative is unlikely to change their vote by reading the *Guardian* and a left-winger will not adjust their attitudes by reading the *Daily Express*; indeed it is likely to only serve to reinforce their existing views.

However, media influence is a complex process, and it is important to acknowledge that it is extremely difficult to isolate the effects of a single factor on voting behaviour, let alone the role the media plays in its entirety (be it the media in general or particular aspects e.g. television, the press, and social media). Nonetheless, it is important not to dismiss the notion of media influence altogether.

Media bias

It is clear that politicians feel that the media has real influence over the voting behaviour of the public. This is exactly why political parties spend so much time and effort either befriending parts of the media or attacking them for their bias. In order to understand how bias may be at work, it is worth thinking about the different ways that bias can be exhibited.

What is bias?

Open bias is explicit and deliberately promoted. Most newspapers in the UK are absolutely clear about their political bias in favour of a particular party or policy. For example, *The Sun* newspaper clearly backed Boris Johnson and the Conservatives in 2019 and Brexit in the 2016 Referendum.

Definition

Open bias: This type of bias is obvious, as it is not hidden, and is clear for people to see.

Photo 6.2 The Sun newspaper backed the Leave campaign in the EU Referendum.



Source: DANIEL SORABJI/AFP/Getty Images

Definition

Hidden bias: Is not clearly obvious, but veiled behind rationalised arguments and neutrality.

Hidden bias is bias that is hidden behind the mask of neutrality and allegations of hidden bias are often aimed at the broadcast media. This type of bias is seen as more problematic due to the reach of the broadcast media and the obligation to demonstrate political balance. There are three main ways that hidden bias is perceived to be apparent.

Firstly, despite the need for balance, smaller parties and minority groups often argue that they are not given a fair hearing in the broadcast media:

» According to Loughborough University, in 2017, 67.1 percent of all politicians' appearances on TV were Conservative or Labour.

Secondly, individual programmes or broadcasters are also perceived by some to exhibit bias:

» Under Boris Johnson in 2019, the Conservatives began boycotting the *Today* programme on Radio 4 over its alleged anti-Tory bias.

» Labour complained about the BBC's political editor Laura Kuenssberg's coverage of the Party and Jeremy Corbyn, and the BBC found she had inaccurately represented Jeremy Corbyn's views on shoot-to-kill policies in the aftermath of the Paris attacks in 2015.

» In May 2020, the BBC publicly stated that Emily Maitlis' opening statement on *Newsnight* regarding the actions of the Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings, during lockdown in 2020, did not meet the standards of impartiality.

Finally, the media is perceived to be part of the establishment and reflects the powerful interests in society: employers not employees, middle class not working class, white not ethnic minority and men not women. The framing of political issues, where the media selects only certain stories and frames them in a particular way, helps shape what the public can think about, rather than just telling them what to think.

» It has been argued that the 2010 and 2015 elections were framed in terms of austerity: debt was dangerous, Britain was broke and that there was no alternative to spending cuts. The narrative that the UK had maxed out its credit card under Labour during the global financial crisis of 2007–9 became the prism through which events, parties and policies were interpreted.

» During the course of the EU Referendum, and subsequent Brexit debate, many Leavers argued that there was an establishment pro-EU bias in the BBC's coverage by promoting more Remain voices on their news output. This led to the debates being interpreted through the problems Brexit would cause and the splits in the Tory party.

Print media and bias

Newspapers are absolutely clear about their bias and political parties encourage that bias where it works in their favour. Back in 1995, there were extensive efforts by the Labour Party and Tony Blair to develop a close relationship with Rupert Murdoch, the owner of *The Sun* and the *News of the World*, and later Tony Blair became godfather to one of Murdoch's children. Blair clearly felt that *The Sun* and *News of the World*, with their large readerships, could promote his leadership of the Labour Party and bring them electoral success.

The problem of newspaper bias is exacerbated by the nature of media ownership, with much of the press now concentrated in the hands of a few press barons. In 2018, just three companies (News UK, DMGT plc and Reach plc) dominated 83% of the national newspaper market, while if you take print and online readers into account, just five companies dominate over 80% of the UK market. This concentration has been increased with further consolidation in 2019 and 2020 (see the changes in ownership in Table 6.3). This gives huge power to the owners, such as Rupert Murdoch of News UK, to shape the media agenda and influence public opinion. It is also

noticeable that a much larger slice of the print media supports the Conservative Party (63.95% of market share in 2018) than the Labour Party (21.40% of market share in 2018). If the print media really matter, this makes it more difficult for Labour to get public opinion on its side and to win elections.

Table 6.3 Media ownership, market share and political bias

News brand	Daily readership 2018	Market share 2018	Party support 2017 Election	Print news brands/ sites	Ownership, 2020
Sun	7,162,000	20.20%	Conservative	Sun; Sun on Sunday	News UK
Daily Mail	6,461,000	18.22%	Conservative	Daily Mail; Mail on Sunday	Daily Mail Group Trust plc
Guardian	4,049,000	11.42%	Labour	Guardian; Observer	Guardian News and Media
Metro	3,597,000	10.14%	None	Metro	Daily Mail Group Trust plc
Daily Mirror	3,539,000	9.98%	Labour	Daily Mirror; Sunday Mirror; Sunday People	Reach Plc
Daily Telegraph	3,348,000	9.44%	Conservative	Daily Telegraph; Sunday Telegraph	Telegraph Media Group Ltd
Evening Standard	2,412,000	6.80%	Conservative	Evening Standard	Evgeny Lebvedev
Daily Express	1,654,000	4.66%	Conservative	Daily Express; Sunday Express	Purchased by Reach plc in 2018
Times	1,642,000	4.63%	Conservative	The Times; Sunday Times	News UK
Daily Star	1,006,000	2.84%	None	Daily Star; Daily Star Sunday	Purchased by Reach plc in 2018
i	593,000	1.67%	None	i	Purchased by Daily Mail Group Trust plc in 2019

Broadcast media and bias

Unlike the press, the broadcast media, which is consumed on a vast scale, is regulated by OFCOM with the aim of ensuring that balance is shown between political parties, and impartiality is maintained in reporting the news. This lack of bias is further reinforced by the journalists working in the broadcast media, who feel neutrality is the central principle of their professionalism. Yet, political parties in modern times are constantly alleging bias in the behaviour of the broadcast media. The Left have attacked the BBC for its pro-employers and anti-workers stance while the Right see the BBC as a liberal institution opposed to conservative values.

Social media and bias

Social media has very weak regulation and next to no usable regulation of online advertising. This means that many stories shared on social media exhibit clear bias and may also stray across into misinformation or fake news with limited consequences. The algorithms that select news stories for your news feed are based on your previous browsing history, meaning that it is likely that individuals will be fed a diet of news stories that confirm their existing political views. More damagingly, the lack of regulation and transparency around political advertising means it is unclear exactly who is being targeted by advertising, with what message and with whose funding.

CASE STUDY 6.1: THE SUN AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION

Photo 6.3 Rupert Murdoch (left) leaving the International Press Corporation in September 1969 after talks on the future of The Sun newspaper.



Source: Keystone/Getty Images.

Key events

- In 2019, *The Sun* was the newspaper with the widest monthly reach when you add together its print and digital media.
- It is also the source of the most famous claim about the influence of the media on politics, with the 1992 headline 'It's The Sun wot won it'.
- Back in 1969, Rupert Murdoch purchased the paper, which was left-leaning before moving vociferously behind Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives in 1979.
- In 1992, with Labour leading in the polls, *The Sun* was aggressive and relentless in its opposition against Labour and their leader, Neil Kinnock.
- At the next election in 1997, *The Sun* transferred its support to Tony Blair and Labour, and backed them for all three of their election victories.
- By 2010, *The Sun* had switched its allegiance back to the Tories and backed them during the 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections as well as supporting Brexit during the EU Referendum.

Significance

This track record of backing the winner in elections since 1979 as well as the EU Referendum raises the question of how much influence newspapers can exert on the political attitudes and voting behaviour of its readers. Clearly, *The Sun* firmly believes it plays a key role, as it expressed in its 1992 headline, but newspapers are bound to exaggerate the importance of their political views to their readers. So what exactly is their impact?

Firstly, it is possible that over a long period of time newspapers are able to shape the view of their readership about a leader or a political party. For example, *The Sun* ran lengthy, ruthless campaigns against Neil Kinnock up to 1992 and Ed Miliband up to 2015 as well as Jeremy Corbyn up to 2019. Yet in 2017, Labour and Corbyn managed to wipe out the Tory majority, with 30% of *The Sun* readers voting Labour according to YouGov, despite the paper's portrayal of the Labour leader as useless, a 'terrorist's friend' and a 'Marxist extremist'. The result led to suggestions that the traditional media influence was weakening due to the rise of social media. In 2017, Corbyn had been Labour leader for less than two years. By the 2019 election, he had been in office for four years and the Labour vote collapsed. This could have been recognition of the ability of *The Sun* and the print media to shape political views over a longer period of time. However, many would argue that it was as much to do with the ongoing divisions in the Labour Party, its anti-Semitism crisis and the Party's Brexit positioning as it was to do with the role of the press.

Secondly, a study by Paul Whitefield on the readership of *The Sun* between 1992 and 1997 revealed that the paper's shift to supporting Labour did not persuade large numbers of its readers to actually vote for Labour, but it did seem to reduce their intention to vote Conservative. In 1992, around one-fifth of *The Sun*'s readers did not vote and this increased to just less than one-third by 1997. The ability to mobilise voters to turn out or stay home can clearly shape the results of elections.

Thirdly, it can be argued that since Rupert Murdoch acquired *The Sun*, the paper was good at identifying which way the winds of public opinion were blowing.

Some argue that *The Sun*'s choice to support a particular political party or party leader – such as Blair and Labour in 1997 – or certain policies – such as Thatcher's policies on council housing, the Falklands War and confronting the unions – is because they were already popular with their readership, rather than they were popular because *The Sun* supported them. According to this view, in 2009, when *The Sun* switched its allegiance to David Cameron and the Tories, they were following many of their readers who had already made that leap. This corresponds to the argument that papers need to reflect their readers' views rather than attempt to change them in order to maintain their readership.

KEY TOPIC DEBATE: DOES THE UK MEDIA HAVE REAL INFLUENCE OVER PUBLIC OPINION AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR?

Broadcast media and influence

✓ **The broadcast media is seen to be incredibly influential as it is a key source of political information and news for the British public. Despite changes in technology, the broadcast media remains dominated by a small number of very influential media outlets, such as the BBC and ITV, with large audiences.**

» Political parties tailor their policy announcements, statements and public visits to get maximum visibility in the news cycle especially during campaigns. Speeches and policies are boiled down into memorable soundbites in order to become the headline or key video clip at the top of the news shows.

» The influence of the broadcast media also means that both looking and sounding good on TV is crucial for modern political leaders. Michael Foot, the Labour leader in 1983, was a brilliant public speaker but uncomfortable on TV and so his credibility was damaged, while both Blair's and Cameron's easy style was key to their success.

» Trust in broadcast media journalists remains high in comparison to the print media, suggesting a far higher level of influence (see Figure 6.6).

» The broadcast media has adapted to the arrival of online media by moving online, with the BBC as the most used source for online news in the 2019 UK Election.

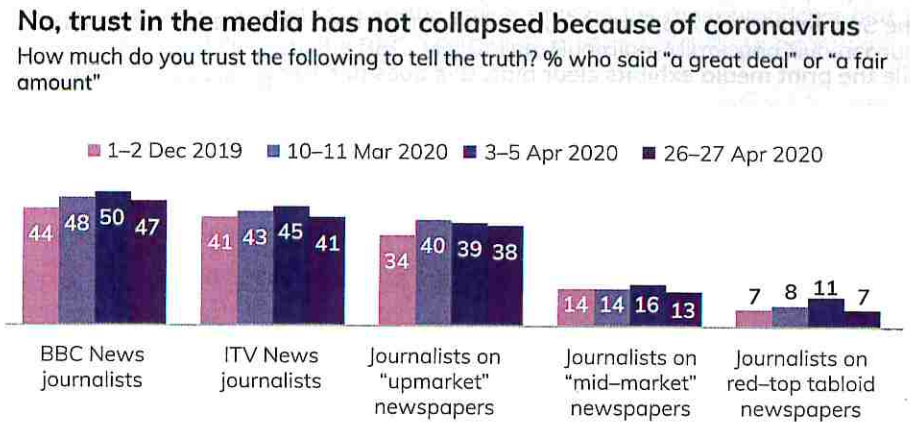
» The framing of news stories in the broadcast media, including which stories are selected, which are omitted, who they choose as commentators and how they choose to construct the narrative gives them real influence. The broadcast media shaped the 2019 election as 'the Brexit election', effectively shaping what the public should be thinking about in casting their vote rather than who to cast their vote for.

✗ **The power of the broadcast media to influence politics is limited.**

» It is constrained by its obligation to impartiality, its professional standards built on neutrality and its monitoring by OFCOM. This appears to limit the ability of the broadcast media to shape how people vote.

» Trust in the broadcast media has declined in general. For example, in YouGov polling, BBC journalists were trusted by 81% and ITV journalists by 82% in 2003 but that figure has fallen significantly since then, further limiting its influence (see Figure 6.6). This decline is driven in part by the increasing belief among viewers and listeners that the broadcast media demonstrates bias in its output.

Figure 6.6 Media trust



Source: Based on data from YouGov.

- The broadcast media's influence has been challenged by the emergence of online media, including social media. In particular, among younger voters and minority ethnic voters, social media is becoming more important, allowing them to access news stories from their friends and family who they trust more than journalists.
- The broadcast media has a tendency to follow the stories created in the printed media, rather than funding original journalism.

Print media and influence

Unlike television, the press is nakedly partisan; national newspapers usually take an explicit stance on which party, or which leader, their readers should vote for, and, in the case of the tabloid press in particular, sometimes expressing these views in strong terms.

- The print media believes in its own power to shape elections and public opinion. *The Sun* has backed the party that has won the most seats in all elections since 1979. The shaping of views of party leaders is particularly important: the repeated media attacks over a long period of time on leaders such as Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock, Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn impacted voting behaviour. The strenuous efforts on the part of Tony Blair in particular to court the Murdoch press in the run up to the 1997 election, backed up by the abandonment of many of Labour's traditional policies, reflects how much importance Labour placed on the print media.
- Political parties and party leaders look to recruit journalists to serve as their directors of communications in order to manage relations with the press: Tony Blair recruited Alastair Campbell, a former political editor of the *Daily Mirror* while David Cameron followed suit, recruiting Andy Coulson, a former editor of the *News of the World*. In 2015, Jeremy Corbyn appointed ex-*Guardian* journalist, Seamus Milne, while Boris Johnson appointed another ex-journalist in Lee Cain in 2019.
- The print media still has extensive reach, in particular with the ABC1 voters and over-65s who are the most likely to turn out in elections. The existence of an essentially pro-Conservative press in the UK does matter, in that it makes Labour's path to power steeper and more challenging than that of the Conservatives, unless, that is, the Labour Party adopts broadly Conservative policies. This, in turn, is a reflection of the impact of newspaper ownership, and of 'press barons' in particular.
- It is not just that the print media might influence voters. It is more that the printed press sets the agenda; where the newspapers lead on issues, far more trusted broadcasters follow. Research from Loughborough University found that issues which dominated the press also led the television news. A good example would be the joint *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* investigation into whether Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson's chief adviser, broke the Covid-19 lockdown rules in 2020, which became the lead story across social media and the broadcast media.
- The print media has moved online successfully, with many print journalists using social media to direct people to stories in the papers they work for. The MailOnline, The Guardian, the Mirror and the Sun were in the top 5 most visited sites during the 2019 Election campaign.

While the print media exhibits clear bias, this does not mean that it has real influence.

- The print media's impact is largely restricted to amplifying or reinforcing pre-existing sympathies or preferences, and rarely extends to generating new preferences or changing established ones.
- Newspapers are more likely to follow the opinion of their readers rather than shape it, as newspapers need to keep their readership; making the *Daily Mail* a left-wing paper would see its readership numbers collapse.
- The readership of the print media is in serious decline. In particular younger voters and working-class voters are increasingly turning their backs on the print media.
- The print media is widely distrusted, in particular the journalism in the tabloid papers such as the *Mirror* or *The Sun* limiting its influence.

- Despite newspapers dominating online news in the 2019 campaign, alongside the BBC, the Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism in Oxford found that on average people only spent 16 minutes per week looking at the news online.
- The heavily Conservative-weighted print media was scathing in its sensationalist and aggressive coverage of Corbyn during the 2017 Election, yet the Labour Party outperformed all expectations and the Conservative Party lost its majority. This was put down to the waning influence of the print media and the rise in importance of social media.

Social media and influence

✓ **Social media is growing in importance, challenging the dominance of the small number of broadcast and print media outlets that traditionally dominate the production of news.**

- Social media is becoming particularly important for younger generations and ethnic minority voters as a source of news. Social media gives people access to news stories and opinion shared by trusted sources, such as friends and family.
- The political parties increasingly view social media as an influential medium for communicating with voters. In 2017, campaigners in the UK spent nearly half (43%) of their total advertising budget on online advertising, compared to less than 1% (0.35%) of their total advertising budget in 2011.
- The 2017 Election was seen as an expression of the new power of social media because Labour was able to counteract negative mainstream media coverage by talking directly to voters during the campaign. Labour was able to create better quality content, especially video content, and get much higher levels of engagement than other parties. Labour strategists believed that if they could present Corbyn directly to people free from media bias, people would see him in a different light. Secondly the content aimed to promote their policies, such as on university tuition fees, to counter the negative print media stories.
- In 2019, the Conservative Party's strategy was far more effective, even though many perceived Labour to win the social media war. The Conservative Party targeted voters in marginal seats with tailored adverts about how Labour would increase the cost of petrol, put up heating bills and hike up inheritance tax. They also targeted Labour MPs in pro-Leave constituencies, showing how many times they had voted against Brexit.

✗ **There is limited evidence that social media has really challenged the dominance of broadcast and print media in shaping politics and elections.**

- Social media's reach is increasing; however, social media is used for far more than just news and politics. In the 2019 campaign, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford reported that approximately 3% of all users' online time was spent on the news.
- Social media news is changing how people access the news but not how it is generated. Much social media posting brings people back to the online sites on the main broadcast and print media players. In the 2019 Election, the BBC, MailOnline, Guardian, Mirror and Sun accounted for 66% of online news consumption.
- The 2019 Election reflected a return to normal service after the 2017 Election. The Conservative social media campaign was more effective and so Labour, despite seeming to win the social media war, was unable to counter the negative impression created by the print media and was heavily beaten in the election.
- Research seems to show the existence of a '**filter bubble**' effect in UK politics, where social media users are more likely to engage with people and media sources that share their political beliefs. This is exacerbated by the idea that social media platforms use algorithms that feed us with stories which are tailored to our views. In this way, social media may reinforce views rather than change them.

Definition

Filter bubble: Happens as web companies aim to make their services more tailored to our individual tastes, meaning people do not get exposed to ideas that challenge or broaden their world view.

Tip – By making clear comparisons across a range of elections, parties and leaders you can develop a higher level of analysis.

Key Debate Summary: Does the media have real influence over public opinion and voting behaviour?

FOR	AGAINST
✓ Political parties and political leaders clearly feel that the media is important as they spend much of their time courting or attacking parts of the media.	✗ The media portrayal of politics does not have a one-way impact on voters. Voters interpret the media through their own attitudes and beliefs formed often through social factors.
✓ Modern election campaigns are very much media campaigns, with the media seeming to play a more crucial role due to electoral volatility.	✗ The lack of trust in the modern media, the lack of time most people spend engaging with the news and the ability of apathetic voters to avoid the news undermines the power of the media.
✓ The broadcast media has the largest reach, is the most trusted and plays a crucial role in framing political debate.	✗ The broadcast media is restricted by impartiality, falling levels of trust and is more likely to follow news stories generated in the print media.
✓ The print media has concentrated ownership, is openly partisan, has a wide readership in print and online, with stories generated by papers tending to dominate the broadcast media and social media.	✗ There is a serious decline in the readership of the print media, widespread distrust of print journalism, and papers tend to reflect not change the views of their readers.
✓ Social media has grown in importance in accessing the news and political information; this is reflected by the political parties spending far more on their online campaigns.	✗ Social media is clearly changing how the news is accessed but not how it is generated. Social media tends to act as an echo chambers rather than an influencer.

The media and democracy

The media is seen as vital to the workings of the democratic system in the UK. It enables free speech and wide-ranging public debate, and offers a wide range of viewpoints and opinions; this is crucial because this education function enables the public to participate in local and national society. At the same time, the media plays a key public interest role by reporting on the activities of the powerful and the workings of the state at all levels. This can involve reporting on the day-to-day activities of local councils and magistrates courts, as well as holding those in the government and Parliament accountable for their actions.

KEY TOPIC DEBATE: DOES THE MEDIA ENHANCE DEMOCRACY?

Print media and democracy

✓ **The UK has a free print media, which is privately owned and can operate free from government interference.** The national newspapers have a wide reach both in print and online, which allows them to describe world, national and local events, bring to life political issues and politics generally, hold power accountable, challenge authority, investigate and provide a forum for public debate.

» In May 2009, the *Daily Telegraph* broke the MPs' expenses scandal story, a public interest investigation that highlighted the misuse of taxpayers' money which led to some politicians going to jail and to Parliamentary reform.

- In 2017, *The Guardian* exposed the *Windrush* Scandal, revealing the Home Office's hostile environment policy that led to blameless British residents, who came to the UK legally from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1973, being wrongly deprived access to public services, threatened with deportation and in some cases deported. Around 50,000 of the 550,000 people who came did not have the relevant documentation to prove their citizenship, as most arrived as children on their parents' passports and never applied for a passport.
- Local papers help keep local authorities in check, making them more efficient by investigating and reporting on local spending and by acting as a watchdog. Local papers also help maintain local levels of democratic engagement by exposing local issues and highlighting local elections. The *Hackney Gazette*'s Hidden Homeless series brought the housing crisis into the public eye in 2017 in Hackney.

✗ **Ownership of the print media is highly concentrated in the hands of a few press barons with too much power to influence public opinion and election outcomes.** Given that many of the stories that start in the main press spread onto social media and broadcast media, this concentrates power and undermines the idea of political equality.

- The dominance of a Conservative print media in setting the agenda arguably makes the job of winning elections far harder for the Labour Party, while it excludes from coverage the minor parties.
- There is an accusation that the print media has dumbed down politics by concentrating more on the private lives and scandals of politicians than on their policies or ideas.
- The role of the press as a watchdog has been called into question. The Leveson Inquiry into the press found that the relationship between the press and politicians was unhealthy for democracy, leading to a lack of trust in the print media and the political process.
- The decline of local press has left a hole in local democracy. Between 2005 and 2017, 238 local newspapers closed down. The collapse may partially help explain why the views of Grenfell Tower residents on the Grenfell Action Group blog about the safety of their building were not picked up by local media outlets prior to the Grenfell fire in 2017.

Broadcast media and democracy

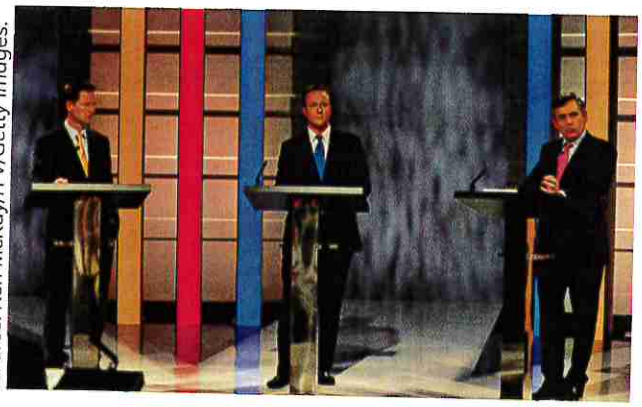
✓ **The partisan nature of the print media is balanced by the impartial nature of the broadcast media, which is regulated by OFCOM.** The broadcast media reaches the widest audience, playing a key role in educating and informing the public while creating space for all parties and different viewpoints.

- During elections in particular, the broadcast media plays the role of educating the public about how the electoral process works. In the 2019 Election campaign, Loughborough University found that 31% of the airtime was devoted to electoral processes with the next most prominent issue as Brexit at 18%. The BBC, in particular, is committed by its own charter 'to promote understanding of the UK political system'.
- Broadcast media remains the most trusted and used of all media sources for most groups in society, especially the BBC when you take into account its TV, radio and internet presence.
- Live TV debates during elections were introduced in 2010, and they have appeared in a range of different formats during elections since then. The first televised debate in 2010 between Gordon Brown (Labour), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats) and David Cameron (Conservatives) attracted 10.3 million views, so played an important educating role.

✗ **The nature of the broadcast media and the increasing competition for viewers has changed the way politics is presented in ways that have been detrimental to democracy.**

- The need to make news coverage more popular has led to the dumbing down of the news, where it is told through celebrity politics and a series of soundbites rather than more in-depth discussions.
- At the same time, with so many channels to choose from, those apathetic about politics can simply avoid all political news, while young people in particular are turning away from the TV news.

Photo 6.4 The first televised leaders' debate was held in 2010, attracting 10.3 million viewers.



Source: Ken McKay/ITV/Getty Images.

» The increasing use of hostile questioning techniques by interviewers encourages the view that politicians are not to be trusted, lowering public trust in politicians, parties and political institutions and leading to apathy and disillusionment.

» This problem is matched by politicians simply refusing to engage with any broadcast media they feel is biased, as the Conservative Government did with Channel 4 news in 2020, depriving the viewers of the Government's view. Even when interviewed, many politicians retreat to the safety of a soundbite rather than engaging with the question in a way that informs.

Social media and democracy

The arrival of social media has hugely increased plurality in the media, as there are now many different sources of news, accessible in many different ways and controlled by such a range of people that the public can be well informed and take a full part in democracy.

» Social media can lead to communication between large numbers of people, opening up political debate and providing a space for the voices of all groups, especially those excluded from the mainstream media, to be heard. This acts as a counterbalance to the concentrated ownership and power of the print and broadcast media.

» Where readership of the print media and viewing of the broadcast media has declined, especially among the younger population, social media has become the source for political news. Social media has become a key tool for voter registration drives, with young people encouraging other young people to engage with the democratic process.

» Social media can create participation in democracy because individuals can follow politicians on social media, interact with them and other political stories by commenting, and wider audience participation can be encouraged by retweeting, liking or signing online petitions. This allows for a far greater level of participation and the ability to hold politicians to account.

The power of the social media to create a new form of democratic participation and to give a voice to the powerless has not really come to pass.

» Social media has created a space for trolling, or online abuse, particularly of women and ethnic minorities and remains a major issue that needs tackling.

» 'Filter bubbles' mean that people only select to follow the news and politicians that they already agree with and, more worrying, the algorithms of the social media platforms only feed people news that meets their pre-existing preferences. This lack of an alternative means that people are more vulnerable to fake news.

» Social media allows for fake news to be spread and spread more quickly, in part because the news can be created by anyone without the fact checking that is part of print or broadcast journalism.

» Dark adverts that can micro-target specific groups with tailored messages, without any real transparency about the origin or the funding, are a potential threat to democracy.

Key Debate Summary: Does the media enhance democracy?

FOR	AGAINST
✓ The print media is free, privately owned and not regulated by the government so it can hold the government to account and work in the public interest.	✗ The print media is not diverse enough, with too much power in too few hands leading to a view that they work in the interests of their owners not the public.
✓ The broadcast media is impartial, balances out the bias in the print media and reaches the widest audience, providing political information and a space for debate.	✗ The broadcast media is reducing politics to a celebrity contest and soundbites while also contributing to falling trust in politicians and the media
✓ Social media provides a much more diverse media, open to all that encourages participation and gives a voice to the voiceless.	✗ Social media has provided a space for trolling, fake news and dark adverts undermining democracy.

Chapter Summary

- Changes in technology have meant that the media has undergone a period of rapid change in the twenty-first century.
- Newspaper readership may have declined but newspapers have moved online and utilised the power of social media. The print media is influential, partisan and ownership is concentrated in very few hands.
- The broadcast media is very influential due to its wide reach, is impartial and is the most trusted media source.
- Social media is emerging as an important part of the media landscape although its influence is perhaps less than it is perceived to be.
- Opinion polls can increase the level of political communication in society but the accuracy and role of opinion polls has come under criticism.
- The power of the media remains highly contentious, with some arguing that it has little influence on political views and voting behaviour while others viewing it as important.
- The media plays an important role in democracy in enabling debate, encouraging participation and holding those in power to account.
- However the media has been accused of dumbing down politics with the focus on celebrity politics and soundbites, creating greater levels of distrust, apathy and disillusionment.

Exam Style Questions

- **Evaluate the view that the media supports democracy in the UK (30).**
- **Evaluate the view that the media has real influence over elections in the UK (30).**
- **Evaluate the view that bias in the UK media has a real impact on public opinion in the UK (30).**
- **Evaluate the view that opinion polls make a positive contribution to democracy in the UK (30).**
- **Evaluate the view that the print media remains more influential than broadcast or social media in UK elections (30).**

Source Question

Source One

TV is seen to be incredibly influential as it is a key source of political information and news for the British public. Despite changes in technology, TV remains dominated by the BBC and ITV with large audiences. Unlike television, the print media is nakedly partisan; national newspapers usually take an explicit stance on which party, or which leader, their readers should vote for, and, in the case of the tabloid press in particular, sometimes expresses these views in strong terms. Lastly, social media is growing in importance, challenging the dominance of the small number of broadcast and print media outlets that traditionally dominate the production of news. It is particularly important for younger generations and ethnic minority voters as a source of news.

Source Two

The power of TV to influence politics is limited as it is constrained by its obligation to impartiality. This limits its ability to shape how people vote. Also, trust in the TV has declined in general because of the increasing belief among viewers and listeners that it is biased. Just because newspapers are biased, this doesn't mean they have real influence. Newspapers' impact is largely restricted to amplifying or reinforcing pre-existing sympathies or preferences, they are more likely to follow the opinion of their readers than to shape it. The readership of newspapers is in serious decline; in particular, younger voters and working class voters are increasingly turning their backs on the print media. Finally, there is limited evidence that social media has really challenged the dominance of broadcast and print media in shaping politics and elections. Much social media posting brings people back to the online sites on the main broadcast and print media players. In the 2019 Election, the BBC, MailOnline, Guardian, Mirror and Sun accounted for 66% of online news consumption.

Using the source, evaluate the view that the UK media has too much influence over the way the public votes.

In your response you must:

- *Compare and contrast different opinions in the source*
- *Examine and debate these views in a balanced way*
- *Analyse and evaluate* **only** *the information presented in the source.*



Further Resources

Griffiths, S. and Leach, R. (2018) *British Politics* (3rd edn) (London: Red Globe Press): Chapter 17: The media.

Heffernan, R., Hay, C., Russell, M. and Cowley, P. (eds) (2016) *Politics and the News Media: Messages and Messengers* (London: Red Globe Press): Chapter 10.

Leveson, Lord Justice (2012) *The Leveson Inquiry: An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press: Executive Summary* (November).

Moran, M. (2017) *Politics and Governance in the UK* (3rd edn) (Palgrave): Chapter 15: How political communication happens.

Street, J. (2010) *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy* (2nd edn) (London: Red Globe Press).



Visit the companion website to access the Further Resources Booklet to explore a range of useful web links related to: the Leveson inquiry, OFCOM data and reports on news consumption, the rise of fake news, the relationship between the media and austerity and more.