



Margaret Thatcher and Media Policy

Richard Tait

*School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies,
Cardiff University, UK*
Email: taitr@cf.ac.uk

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Abstract

Margaret Thatcher's radical influence on the structure of the UK media can be seen to the present day. She set out to break the BBC/ITV duopoly, which she regarded as encouraging restrictive practices and a barrier to new talent.

The 1990 Broadcasting Act undermined the public service commitment of ITV and paved the way for the destruction of its regional structure. Although she failed in her desire to replace the BBC's licence fee with advertising, she forced the BBC to change its management and culture. The launch of Channel 4 as a publisher/broadcaster and the obligation on ITV and the BBC to take 25% of their programmes from independents created a thriving independent production sector. Her government helped Rupert Murdoch achieve his current dominance of the national newspaper and commercial television markets.

Her period in office was marked by the role of lobbying by media organisations. The Thatcher government nodded through Murdoch's key deals – the takeover of Times Newspapers in 1981 and the merger of Sky with British Satellite Broadcasting (BSB) in 1990 to create BskyB – without reference to the competition authorities or the regulators.

The evidence disclosed at the Leveson Inquiry shows, in some cases for the first time, how Margaret Thatcher was personally involved in these deals, setting a precedent for the increasingly intense (and usually secret) contacts between politicians and media organisations which helped determine media policy under Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

Only now, with digital technology setting the UK media a new set of challenges and with the phone-hacking scandal wrecking Rupert Murdoch's bid for the whole of BskyB, is the influence of the Thatcher years clearly fading.

Contributor Note

Richard Tait is Professor of Journalism at Cardiff University. From 2003 to 2012 he was also Director of the Centre for Journalism. He worked for BBC Current Affairs from 1974 to 1987, where he was Editor of The Money Programme and Newsnight. He joined Independent Television News (ITN) in 1987, first as Editor of Channel 4 News, and from 1995 to 2002 as Editor-in-Chief. He was a Governor and then a Trustee of the BBC from 2004 to 2010. He is Chairman of INSI (UK), the London branch of the International News Safety Institute. His most recent publication is a chapter on the phone-hacking scandal in *The Sage Handbook of Political Communication*.



In few parts of British life is the Thatcher legacy still as strong as in the media. Margaret Thatcher did not achieve all her media policy objectives, but the shape, structure and culture of British newspapers and television today bear the unmistakable mark of the Thatcher era – the destruction of the BBC/ITV duopoly, the growth of multi-channel television and independent production and the emergence of Rupert Murdoch as the most powerful media mogul in British history.

Twenty three years after her overthrow, it is only recently, with the impact of digital technology on traditional media and the unexpected collapse in the summer of 2011 of the Murdoch bid for complete dominance of the British commercial media scene, that her influence, for good or ill, is beginning to fade as the UK's media industries grapple with issues which she could never have fully anticipated.

And only now, with the evidence that has emerged in the last year from the Leveson inquiry, have the details of the relationship between politicians and the media in the Thatcher era and since emerged from the secrecy which had largely obscured the trade-offs of influence and political support. Under Margaret Thatcher, lobbying by media organisations and their leaders wanting favours or changes in policy became of critical importance and the practice has continued and intensified under her successors, Conservative and Labour. The Leveson inquiry revealed how for the last thirty years media policy in the UK has been a highly politicised area from which most of the public and on occasions, the public interest, have been excluded.

Margaret Thatcher was the first British Prime Minister fully to understand the

importance of television. Her media adviser, Gordon Reece, a former commercial television producer, was credited with softening her image on screen. But her view of the television industry when she entered Downing Street was a bleak one. She saw broadcasting as 'one of a number of areas – the professions such as teaching, medicine and the law were others – in which special pleading by powerful interest groups was disguised as a high minded commitment to some greater good' (Thatcher 1993: 634).

Her main target was the BBC/ITV duopoly. To its supporters, the duopoly had delivered what was in the developed world a uniquely high standard of programme quality across both publicly funded and commercially funded broadcasting. It had achieved this by a generous level of licence fee for the BBC and a system of allocating commercial television franchises, which placed priority on the quality of the programme promises the companies made in order to win their lucrative licences.

Margaret Thatcher had no time for the argument that the duopoly had delivered quality. For her, the duopoly encouraged restrictive practices, increased costs and kept out talent. But tackling it was a project for more than one parliament – the long-term nature of the BBC Charter and the ITV franchises, ironically designed precisely to protect broadcasting from excessive political interference, meant that some of the most radical changes were only implemented in practice after she had been driven from office in 1990. Whereas in most areas of industrial policy – mining, manufacturing, finance – the impact of the 'Thatcher revolution' was plain for all to see in her political lifetime, the impact of the changes she brought

to the media scene lived on long after her premiership.

Two decisions in the early years set the scene for what was to follow. The creation of Channel 4 in 1982 was in tune with Thatcher's desire to see greater competition; the decision to make it a publisher broadcaster launched the independent sector which is now such an important part of the UK creative economy. But the organisation that emerged from the 1980 Broadcasting Act was a compromise in an older tradition of public service broadcasting. The channel was to be commercially funded but a public corporation, with an ambitious remit specifying high quality and innovative programming, rather than profit, as its primary objective (Goodwin 1998: 25-34). Margaret Thatcher was never happy with this – in the mid 1980s she argued for the channel to be privatised, and only abandoned the idea in the face of opposition from her Home Secretary at the time, Douglas Hurd (Thatcher 1993: 636).

The decision to make Channel 4 a publisher broadcaster created a substantial new market for independent producers. Together with the setting of a 25% independent quota for ITV and the BBC in the 1990 Broadcasting Act, it created what has become one of the most dynamic and successful sectors in British broadcasting.

The quota was resisted and initially resented by the traditional broadcasters. There was a difference of opinion in the Cabinet over whether ITV and the BBC would accept an independent quota without legislation to force them to implement it. Douglas Hurd and Willie Whitelaw thought it could be achieved by persuasion, Margaret Thatcher and Nigel Lawson believed they would have to

legislate and in the end were proved right. Had the 1990 Act not made the quota a legal obligation, the independent sector would never have developed as it now has (Thatcher 1993: 636).

Indeed, what is striking about the independent sector is that its status in British broadcasting has not changed very much since the 1990 Act. There have been changes in the terms of trade to protect independents' digital rights and the BBC has opened up a further 25% of its output to the Window of Creative Competition, but the independent sector still depends for the basis of its existence and success on decisions taken in the Thatcher era.

Other aspects of the Thatcherite assault on the duopoly were much more controversial. Margaret Thatcher had little time for the BBC and was keen to find an alternative to the licence fee. She set up a commission under a free-market economist, Alan Peacock, to examine the future financing of the BBC. Her preference was advertising – but when he reported in 1986 Peacock rejected this and suggested a shift to subscription in the long term, which did not win much support. Her deputy, Willie Whitelaw, told her he would resign if she made the BBC take advertising. The best she could achieve, as chair of the cabinet committee on broadcasting, was to freeze the licence fee and then index it (Thatcher 1993: 636).

She was more successful in changing the management and supervision of the BBC, writing in her autobiography there was a limit to what could be achieved by changing the system: 'as always, it was the people who operated within it who were the key' (Thatcher 1993: 637). The Board of Governors, which was meant to act as a shield between the broadcast professionals and the politicians,

increasingly reflected the views and prejudices of the Government; the Director General, Alasdair Milne, was fired in 1987 (Born 2004: 47-52). The new regime, with Duke Hussey as chairman and John Birt as deputy director general and later director general was much more to her taste: 'an improvement in every respect' (Thatcher 1993: 637).

There is no doubt that in many ways the BBC under John Birt evolved in ways Mrs Thatcher would have regarded as an improvement – and the threat of privatisation disappeared. But despite, or, as John Birt might argue, because of, the managerial and cultural changes he achieved, the BBC remained a dominant force in British broadcasting and culture (Born 2004: 47-64). Ironically its position in terrestrial television was further strengthened by the impact of Margaret Thatcher's radical approach to its main competitor, ITV.

Peacock's recommendations for the BBC had been largely ignored. But two of his other suggestions were picked up by the government with some enthusiasm. The first was to force the BBC and ITV to take a proportion of their programmes from independents. The second was even more radical – that the allocation of ITV regional franchises should be by a process of competitive tendering, with the licences going to the highest bidder. Previously, the licences had been allocated by the regulator on the basis of programme promises – the bidder who offered the best regional and network programmes was meant to get the licence (Bonner, Aston 1998: 332-354).

Any slim chance the existing ITV management had of deflecting the government from this course of action disappeared after a disastrous seminar on the future of broadcasting in Downing

Street on 21 September 1987. Mrs Thatcher attacked independent television as the last bastion of restrictive practices, listened approvingly as Michael Green of Carlton, who had been prevented in 1985 by the regulators from taking over Thames, the biggest ITV company, argued that he had built up a £600 million media business but was kept out of broadcasting itself by the status quo. Green had been lobbying Thatcher personally for a change in the rules and also had a close relationship with David Wolfson, chief of staff at 10 Downing Street (Bonner, Aston 1998: 355-367).

The 1990 Broadcasting Act gave the new regulator, the Independent Television Commission (ITC), the duty to set a minimum quality threshold for all bids for ITV licences, but once that had been met the highest bidder won. George Russell, the ITC chairman, recently revealed that Mrs Thatcher herself had some second thoughts about having a complete free for all. In a Cabinet discussion she supported him in wanting to have some discretion over programme quality (Snoddy 2013: 24). In the event, however, she pronounced herself dissatisfied with the compromise which gave the ITC limited discretion, complaining, a little unfairly, that the regulator had operated 'in the old fashioned way' (Thatcher 1993: 638).

In fact, the ITV that emerged from the 1992 franchise round was a very different broadcaster from its predecessor. Instead of a loose federation of regional companies with a central commitment to public service broadcasting (which had never stopped the companies making substantial profits), it was now primarily a profit-driven business with maintaining minimum quality standards the only brake

on going rapidly down market. The biggest loser was Thames Television whose London weekday franchise went to the biggest winner, Michael Green's Carlton. And perhaps the next biggest victim of the new system was Bruce Gyngell's TV-am, which lost its breakfast licence. Gyngell, like Murdoch, was an outsider, an aggressive Australian manager who had been prepared to challenge the unions. Thatcher sent him a personal note saying how sorry she was that her legislation had been responsible (Gyngell: 2013).

The franchise round, though skilfully managed by the ITC, left ITV with a fundamentally unstable structure. It was dominated by three significant companies all led by newcomers to broadcasting – Michael Green at Carlton, Gerry Robinson at Granada and Clive Hollick at United. All three of them saw the commercial future in consolidation and cost cutting, with the eventual prize being turning the federation of regional companies into a single Channel 3 broadcaster (Bonner, Aston 1998: 477-480). As time went on the companies lobbied successfully to have the financial 'burden' of their public service obligations reduced by the regulator. Among the casualties of this process was the commitment to regional programming that had once been at the heart of the ITV system (Tait 2006: 27-36).

It was to take a decade for Granada/LWT, led by Robinson's successor Charles Allen, to come out on top in the new ITV plc and it is hard to find anyone in the industry to disagree with George Russell's argument that it took too long to create a single company for England. While the ITV companies were fighting among themselves, BSkyB became the dominant commercial broadcaster and

the BBC the dominant terrestrial broadcaster (Snoddy 2013 :27).

Mrs Thatcher's willingness to be lobbied by people she liked or who shared her views also had serious long-term consequences for ITV's news service, Independent Television News (where, to declare an interest, I worked from 1987 to 2002). ITN was wholly owned by the ITV companies, but ITN's star newscaster Alastair Burnet, who was on good terms with Thatcher, persuaded her and the government that ITN would have a better future if it had a wider ownership.

The 1990 Broadcasting Act took control of ITN away from ITV – no ITV company could own more than 20% and the majority of the shares had to be held by non-ITV companies. The ITV companies were incandescent at losing control of a company they had created and supported for more than three decades and this new settlement, which they deeply resented, was at the root of many of the problems ITN experienced in the decade to follow (Lindley 2005: 284-39).

But in no area of media policy was the power of lobbying more clearly deployed than in Margaret Thatcher's relationship with Rupert Murdoch. Two major business deals – the takeover of Times Newspapers and the creation of BSkyB – raised public interest and regulatory issues. Both were nodded through by the Thatcher government and gave Murdoch the dominant position he still enjoys in UK media.

The Thatcher government's decision not to refer Rupert Murdoch's acquisition of The Times and The Sunday Times in 1981 to the competition authorities created a newspaper group with an unprecedented share of the UK national newspaper market. The Leveson Inquiry decided to take it as a case study to

better understand the relationships between the press and the politicians, with evidence from many of the surviving participants and the release of previously unseen documents (Leveson 2013: 1233-1245).

Although what exactly happened is still a matter of bitter controversy – even Lord Justice Leveson seemed unable to get completely to the bottom of it – the documents which finally emerged at his inquiry told, for the first time, something approaching the real story. In late 1980 Rupert Murdoch was negotiating with Thomson, the owner of The Times and Sunday Times, to take over both papers. His News Group already owned the Sun and The News of The World. The deal would give him nearly 40% of the national newspaper market and automatically should have triggered a reference to the competition authorities unless the government intervened to stop it, on the grounds that the papers were going to close and the deal being offered was the only chance to save them.

Rupert Murdoch had invited himself to Sunday lunch at Chequers on 4 January 1981 with Margaret Thatcher and Bernard Ingham, No.10's director of communications. According to Ingham's secret file note of the meeting, the main purpose was to brief the Prime Minister on Murdoch's bid for Times Newspapers. Murdoch went into detail on the costs, manning levels, his business plan and the other potential bidders. He also stressed how important the deal was to him – 'Mr Murdoch freely admitted that some £50 million of the News Group's resources could be at risk and that such an amount "could finish us"' (Ingham 1981: 1-3).

Ingham noted:

The Prime Minister thanked Mr Murdoch for keeping her posted on his operations. She did no more than wish him well in his bid, noting the need for much improved arrangements in Fleet Street affecting manning and the introduction of new technology. Mr Murdoch made it clear that in his view the prime need, given the inevitability of progressing gradually, was to apply existing technology with reasonable manning levels. (Ingham 1981: 3)

The meeting remained a secret until the document was disclosed as part of the Leveson Inquiry. Margaret Thatcher never spoke of it. Rupert Murdoch never mentioned it to Graham Stewart, the official historian of The Times, when he interviewed him on the takeover in 1995. Murdoch told the Leveson inquiry that he had no recollection of the meeting. Lord Leveson commented:

It is perhaps a little surprising that he does not remember a visit to a place as memorable as Chequers, in the context of a bid as important as that which he made for Times Newspapers. However, perhaps that is all I need to say. (Leveson 2012: 1245)

Two weeks after this meeting, on 15 January, Murdoch sent the Prime Minister a handwritten note thanking her, a little belatedly, for the lunch, but adding

'The Times' business is proceeding and the field has contracted down to only two or three of us. Thomson's will make up their mind in the next day or so. (Murdoch 1981)

By now the deal was gathering pace. On 16 January the Thomson management agreed that Murdoch was the preferred bidder (Hamilton 1981). The only concern for both companies after that was a political one: that the Trade Secretary John Biffen would refer the deal to the competition authorities, which might either wreck the deal altogether, or give Murdoch the chance to renegotiate the price. On the morning of the 26 January Biffen met Murdoch. He gave him the impression that he was likely to recommend a referral. Later in the day he received a letter from Thomson threatening to close the papers if a referral meant the deal went beyond its self-imposed deadline.

The issue was discussed at the Cabinet Economic Committee at 4.45 that afternoon. The Prime Minister chaired the meeting and the committee consisted of all the senior members of the Cabinet. Biffen told them he had two options – to refer the deal and hope Thomson would extend its deadline or to allow the takeover to go through without a reference, accepting some assurances Murdoch had given on editorial issues.

The Cabinet committee minute makes clear that the Cabinet Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, was pushing him towards nodding the deal through:

In discussion it was suggested that, if the Secretary of State for Trade were to refer the bid to the MMC, it was unlikely that the Thomson Organisation would in practice refuse to extend their deadline. In the circumstances there seemed, however, little advantage to be gained from a reference, and considerable risks and costs in making it. (Cabinet 1981)

At least one of the Ministers round the table that afternoon, James Prior, who later fell out with Margaret Thatcher, believed that Biffen, in deciding not to refer the deal, was simply carrying out the Prime Minister's wishes – Prior thought it was a political decision, cynically made to supplement the government's press support (Page 2003: 271-2).

Rupert Murdoch himself acknowledged Margaret Thatcher's support in an interview with Charles Moore, Thatcher's official biographer. He told Moore: 'probably because of the political stance of The Sun, she knew where I stood. I'm sure Biffen must have got instructions or just read the tea leaves' (Moore 2013: 549).

At the time, opponents of the deal were convinced there had been a political fix – but they lacked the documentary evidence to prove it. Some support for their view came from Lord Wyatt's Diaries 20 years later, where he claimed that there had been a political deal but that he had brokered it (Page 2003: 268-9). However, Wyatt was accused of exaggerating his influence with both Murdoch and Thatcher and the recent revelation that the two principals had met to discuss the detail of the bid suggests his role, if anything, was a secondary one.

What mattered at the time was that whatever the precise facts of the case (and they are only now emerging) the Thatcher government had helped Rupert Murdoch become with one deal the dominant force in British national newspapers – a position which remains unchallenged to this day. The 1981 deal marked the start of an era of lobbying and private negotiations between the politicians and the media.

Lord Justice Leveson concluded that Rupert Murdoch, as he had told the inquiry, had not explicitly asked Thatcher for help with the takeover and that the Prime Minister had not personally taken the decision not to refer the bid (Leveson 2013: 1122). But his comment on the 1981 lunch shows he was unimpressed by the secrecy that surrounded the deal:

However, that there was a confidential meeting between the then Prime Minister and Mr Murdoch, the fact of which did not emerge into the public domain for more than 30 years, is troubling in its lack of transparency. It serves as a reminder of the importance of contemporary practice to make public the fact of such meetings. The perceptions at the time and since of collusive arrangements between the Prime Minister and the preferred bidder are corrosive of public confidence. (Leveson 2013: 1245)

If the 1981 lunch helped ensure Murdoch's dominance of national newspapers, a meeting at Downing Street in 1990 helped secure what was to become an equally dominant position in commercial television. The situation had eerie similarities to The Times takeover – Murdoch was negotiating to merge the UK's two satellite television operations – his loss-making but efficiently run Sky Television with the hapless British Sky Broadcasting (BSB) (Chippindale, Franks 1991: 266-294).

He needed the deal as much as BSB – his bankers were rapidly running out of patience with the mounting losses. But there were potentially some complex regulatory and competition issues and he did not want the regulators or the competition authorities to get in the way.

On 29 October 1990, as the lawyers were finalising the commercial agreement, he went to see Margaret Thatcher, who was about to step down, to brief her on the merger plans. Murdoch later recalled the meeting:

She was showing out a foreign visitor and she said to him: 'Here is Mr Murdoch, who gives us Sky News, the only unbiased news in the UK'. I said: 'Well you know it is costing us a lot, and we are going to have to do a merger', and she just nodded. This was the day before the announcement. (Horsman 1997: 72)

The deal was going through at precisely the moment regulation of UK broadcasting was passing from the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to the new Independent Television Commission (ITC). But there was a five-day hiatus in the legislation during which neither the IBA or the ITC had the power to regulate satellite television. By the time the ITC had the power to regulate satellite ownership the deal had been done.

Sir George Russell, the new chairman of the ITC later said:

I expect this move was known in the cabinet, but it was not known to us. She (Mrs Thatcher) knew before we did and no information was passed to us. There was a strange gap, because the rules on satellite ownership had not yet come in. It was a clever move at the time. (Horsman 1997: 75)

Although the deal was ostensibly a merger, the bruised BSB shareholders sensibly gave Murdoch management control of the new company, which under a series of talented chief

executives – notably Sam Chisolm and Tony Ball – used its monopoly of satellite broadcasting skilfully. Over the next two decades the new company – British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB) – became the most powerful and successful commercial broadcaster in the UK, with revenues dwarfing those of its rivals.

What is also striking is that from the premiership of Margaret Thatcher onwards, the conventional political wisdom appears to have been that the support of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers was a key factor in winning general elections and that no sensible party would challenge his dominance of the national newspaper market or worry too much about the rise of BSkyB (Tait 2012: 520-522).

Rupert Murdoch told the Leveson inquiry that he had never asked a Prime Minister for anything, that he wanted to put to bed the complete myth that he used the power of his newspapers to get political influence (Murdoch 2012a: 9). Nor did he accept the quotation attributed to Paul Keating, the Australian Prime Minister that 'You can do deals with him without ever saying a deal is done' (Murdoch 2012b: 65).

The evidence of the lobbying and confidential contacts between Murdoch's News Corporation and the Blair, Brown and Cameron governments as revealed in the Leveson Inquiry show that the precedents set in the Thatcher era continue to the present day. As David Cameron put it in the July 2011 debate on the phone hacking scandal:

The point I would make is that we have all got to be open about the fact that both Front Benches spent a lot of time courting Rupert Murdoch, courting News International, courting the Russian who

owns *The Independent* – and the Daily Mail and the BBC while we are at it. Everyone has done it. And we have got to admit that this sort of relationship needs to be changed and put on a more healthy basis. Now we are prepared to admit it, but basically, if you like, the clock has stopped on my watch, and I am determined to sort it out. (House of Commons 2011)

The irony of the phone hacking scandal is that it torpedoed, at the last minute, the final great Murdoch deal in the UK media – the acquisition by his News Corporation of the 61% of BSkyB which he did not own. After intensive high-pressure lobbying on a scale never seen in the Thatcher era (Leveson 2013: 1185-1232) Britain was on the verge of what a respected industry analyst, Claire Enders, could describe as the UK's 'Berlusconi Moment' (Enders 2010). Then the Guardian's revelation that The News of the World had hacked Milly Dowler's phone derailed the deal and put in train the events which led to the appointment of Lord Justice Leveson (Davies 2011).

It is too early to say whether the Leveson Inquiry and its revelations will mean that July 4 2011, the day of the Guardian story, marked the high water mark of the Murdoch empire. What is clear is that the Thatcher legacy in media policy is finally on the wane, two decades after her removal from office. The challenges of digital technology, paywalls and on demand viewing have succeeded the comparatively simple issues of the battles for market share in linear television. The issues for all newspaper groups, whether they have 37% of the market or much less, are equally challenging and equally far removed

from the struggles for dominance in the 1980s.

It could be argued that many of the changes Margaret Thatcher instigated would have happened anyway – the duopoly was doomed with the arrival of satellite and cable; Rupert Murdoch and his executives were better newspaper (and television) managers than their competitors; the BBC needed a shake-up and ITV's complacency had left it ill-prepared for the multi-channel future. Murdoch has kept *The Times* alive, paying its substantial losses for the last thirty years. His confrontation with the print unions probably saved a number of papers from premature bankruptcy; BSkyB has been an innovative force in broadcasting (Hewlett 2013).

It is also the case that the institutions and traditions of British broadcasting resisted some of the most radical attempts to shift the culture from 'public

service' to 'the discipline of the market' (Goodwin 1998: 163-173). But the Thatcher revolution in media policy forced the pace of change in a number of ways, some positive, some less so. It is only in 2013, as we survey the consequences of nearly three decades of media policy making from which the public has been almost completely excluded, that the consequences of that exclusion can begin to be properly assessed.

So far, the debate about the media post-Leveson has focused almost exclusively on the bitter arguments over how best to provide independent self-regulation of newspapers. There also needs to be a serious examination of how to reform the relationship between the media and the politicians – a problem whose roots go back to the Thatcher era. The challenge for the future is to ensure that the public as well as the insiders have a voice in that debate.

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