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Where's the Spin? The Executive and News Management in France

Raymond Kuhn

This article examines news management by the French executive. With examples taken mainly from the Chirac presidency, it argues that the French executive has been influenced by the trend towards greater professionalisation of political communication in recent years and that its capacity to act as a 'primary definer' for the news media is significant. Nonetheless, the fragmentation of the core authorities, a certain bureaucratic resistance to public communication activities and a less deferential journalistic culture than in the past undermine the applicability of a 'command and control' model to news management in the contemporary era.

It is axiomatic that executives in advanced democratic societies pay close attention to managing their political communication with and through the news media. They do so with the aim of achieving a variety of mutually reinforcing objectives: to maintain, or better still improve, their electoral popularity; to retain the confidence of their supporters in parliament and across the country; to seize the initiative from their political opponents; to manage public expectations regarding governmental policy initiatives; to convey the impression of being in control of events; and to reinforce their authority at the heart of the political system. In a highly mediated culture of self-promotion, the tasks of news management, image construction, symbolic communication and message framing have all become part of the common currency of executive activities in contemporary democracies: 'Gouverner, c'est communiquer'.¹ In this respect the French Fifth Republic is no exception to the rule.

Yet at the same time it is clear that the interrelationship between the executive and the news media in France is heavily influenced by national characteristics and particularities and that these differentiate the French experience from that obtaining in, say, the United Kingdom or the USA. The configuration of the media landscape,

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the semi-presidential institutional framework of the regime and the professional culture of political journalists are just three of the factors which among others contribute to making France if not exceptional then at least distinctive in any cross-national comparison.

This article starts from the premiss, therefore, that there exists a French variant to news management at executive level which is worth examining in its own terms as *both* a particular example of the general rule *and* a case study of national specificity. Using examples largely taken from the Chirac presidency, it argues that the French executive has been influenced by the trend towards greater professionalisation of political communication in recent years and that its capacity to act as a 'primary definer' for the news media is considerable. Nonetheless, the fragmentation of the core authorities, a bureaucratic cultural resistance to public communication activities and a less compliant journalistic profession than in the past undermine the applicability of a 'command and control' model to news management in the contemporary era.

The Professionalisation of Executive Communication

A general feature of executive communication in advanced democracies at the start of the twenty-first century is its increased professionalisation compared with the situation that prevailed 30 or 40 years ago (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, pp. 207–210). Executive politicians now commit significant resources to public communication via the news media and employ professional staff from the worlds of advertising, public relations and journalism to help get their message across to the electorate. In Anglo-American democracies the concept of the 'spin doctor' has even entered into the terminology of popular discourse and the activities of this much-demonised figure have themselves become part of political reportage as journalists seek to unpack executive 'spin' for their audiences. Meanwhile sound bites have been added to the communicative armoury of all elite political actors. 'Oui à l'économie de marché, non à la société de marché' and 'Je veux faire l'Europe, sans défaire la France' are just two examples from the recent Jospin premiership (Moscovici, 2003, pp. 116, 137–138).

While the extent of this professionalisation of political communication clearly varies from one advanced democracy to another, everywhere it has been influenced to some degree by the sharing and transfer of skills, knowledge and practices across national boundaries. For example, in common with many of their counterparts in Western Europe, French politicians have often looked to North America for innovative ideas in political communication techniques, notably in the field of election campaigning. In this regard, Jean Lecanuet, one of the opposition candidates to de Gaulle in the 1965 presidential election (conventionally regarded as the first 'television election' in France), is usually cited as the trend-setter in the importation of American-style image-based advertising into French campaigns. Yet while the emulation of practices originating in the United States has led some critics to talk of a possible Americanisation of political communication across contemporary democracies, this label is too simplistic and all-encompassing to be accurate. Instead, many

commentators prefer to speak about the *modernisation* of political communication as elite political actors in different developed societies make selective choices from wherever they think most appropriate and these are then adapted to suit their particular national circumstances (Swanson & Mancini, 1996; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). During the 1990s, for example, political advisers in the Jospin government sought to draw lessons from the New Labour government's approach to news management in Britain (Amar & Chemin, 2002, p. 138), while one of the most famous sound bites coined by New Labour in opposition—'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'—later popped up on the other side of the Channel.²

In France the process of professionalisation of executive communication has also been driven by national factors, even if none of these can be regarded as especially unique to the French case. Four in particular are worth mentioning here. First are the growing and insistent demands of the news media for fresh stories and new angles, with political journalists engaged in a competitive struggle for background briefing, insider access and official comment. The expansion of news outlets, notably in broadcasting and electronic media, and the development of rolling news channels with the concomitant compression of time and space have raised the stakes for all elite political actors in their efforts to shape the news agenda and satisfy the media's apparently insatiable appetite for information. The French television system, for instance, has changed beyond recognition from the highly restricted provision of the state monopoly in the 1960s and 1970s (Kuhn, 1995, pp. 109–164). Particularly during the past decade, multi-channel television transmitted via cable and satellite has extended its audience reach, with the latest distribution platform—digital terrestrial television—coming on stream in the spring of 2005. This expansion has increased the range of political information outlets available to audiences, including the rolling news channels i-Télé and LCI, with their close organisational links to Canal + and TF1 respectively.

Second, the French media system now consists of a highly complex and differentiated mix of mainstream, minority and specialist outlets: from radio stations catering for particular niche markets to regional newspapers with large circulations in their specific territorial fiefdom (Martin, 2002, pp. 305–413), from weekly news magazines aimed at well-educated, elite readerships to Internet websites used by information junkies and the merely curious alike. This variety allows core executive actors to select their medium of choice to reach the desired target group: an appearance on Radio Shalom to address the concerns of Jewish voters regarding anti-Semitic attacks; an extended interview on M6's *Zone Interdite* to connect with young voters; a one-to-one with Patrick Poivre d'Arvor on the TF1 evening news to secure the largest possible mass audience; or an article placed in *Le Monde* with the aim of influencing key decision-makers and opinion-formers. This 'pick and mix' approach to placing their message in particular media outlets is a rational response on the part of political actors to a situation in which they can no longer simply rely on voters accessing traditional sources of political information en masse. The downgrading of political coverage on mainstream television, particularly on the commercial channels

(Coulomb-Gully & Tournier, 2001), the reduced interest on the part of some voters, notably the young, towards conventional politics and the fragmentation of media audiences in response to the expansion of supply have forced politicians to go beyond established forms and genres of political journalism to communicate with voters.

Third, an evaluation of democratic executives is now routinely undertaken by means of opinion polls, the results of which are published on a regular and frequent basis in the news media. France is one of the most heavily polled democracies in the world, with the performance of the government as a whole and of individual politicians such as the president, prime minister and leading ministers constantly monitored and evaluated by media pundits. This taking of the temperature of the nation on a host of political questions in opinion polls, combined with frequent electoral consultations, has contributed to the notion of the 'permanent campaign' in France, whereby political actors are constantly competing in the marketplace for voter preferences and positioning themselves for the next electoral battle. In such a context, the capacity to manage one's political image, shape the media agenda and influence the framing of news coverage may not just have an impact on electoral outcomes but also make or break the career ambitions of individual elite politicians.

Finally, there is a tendency across advanced democracies for electorates to have become more dealigned than in the past, more volatile in their voting behaviour and more likely to abstain from the electoral process. In the French case, the combination of partisan dealignment and electoral volatility has resulted in no French government being successfully returned to power since the parliamentary elections of 1978, while voter turn-out has in general been on the decline in recent years, including in first-order elections (Muxel, 2001). At the same time, there is strong opinion poll evidence of considerable cynicism among the French electorate towards the process of representative politics and the performance of career politicians. These features of voter attitudes and behaviour have made governmental (and party) communication potentially more significant than before for public opinion formation, electoral mobilisation and the shaping of voter preferences.

In short, across advanced democracies, including France, pressure on politicians to professionalise their public communication has been generated by the increased demands of the news media and the changing expectations of the electorate. In no political system, however, do these demands and expectations simply *determine* the communicative strategies and behaviour of elite political actors in the mediated public sphere. Instead, common transnational pressures for change are filtered, shaped and reconfigured by national (and sub-national) practices, institutional arrangements and elite cultures.

The French Executive as a 'Primary Definer' for the News Media?

Whatever the extent of the variation in the professionalisation of their political communication activities, all executives in advanced democracies enjoy the benefit of three key assets which guarantee them privileged access on a routine basis as official

sources to the news media: significant organisational resources in terms of finance and personnel; extensive insider knowledge and policy expertise across a range of political issues; and a high degree of legitimacy conferred through the electoral process. It might be thought that this combination of organisational resources, expert knowledge and political legitimacy would ensure that the French executive could adopt a position of 'command and control' in the field of news media management with regard to both agenda structuring and issue framing.

The theoretical model centred on the concept of 'primary definer' would certainly support such a hypothesis. This model places the news media in a subordinate and secondary role to major power holders in society—including the executive branch—in the task of agenda construction. According to this account, the organisational demands and professional values of the news production process 'combine to produce a systematically structured *over-accessing* to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions' (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 58, emphasis in original). In turn, this 'permits the institutional definers to establish the initial definition or *primary interpretation* of the topic in question' (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 58, emphasis in original). As a result, 'the media are frequently not the "primary definers" of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as "accredited sources"' (Hall *et al.*, 1978, p. 59, emphasis in original).

A notable recent instance of the French executive acting as a 'primary definer' for the news media took place in the early 'honeymoon' months of the Raffarin premiership, during which French television news prominently featured the issue of road safety, which President Chirac had recently announced as a high political priority. In the autumn of 2002 the news programmes of TF1, France 2 and France 3 ran 554 stories on road safety compared to 123 during the same period in 2001, a jump in coverage wholly out of proportion with any increase in the number of road accidents (Séry, 2003). Both in the number of stories devoted to this theme (agenda structuring) and the nature of the coverage (issue framing), French television news in effect acted as a publicist for the potentially controversial measures—including the introduction of speed cameras—implemented by the government.

In sharp contrast, a few months later, during the heatwave in the summer of 2003, the Raffarin government's news management strategy found itself flailing in response to a crisis situation (Abenheim, 2003). In substantive terms ministers and officials frequently provided inadequate and inaccurate responses to journalists' questions; in symbolic terms the government got its communication signals woefully wrong. One of the iconic television images of the summer of 2003 was that of the health minister, Jean-François Mattei, appearing on the main evening TF1 news programme to talk about the crisis, dressed in a sports shirt and clearly speaking from his holiday location. Whatever the validity of the minister's textual comments, the overall image conveyed to the concerned viewer was wholly inappropriate. During the crisis the Raffarin government failed to manage the news coverage, while

President Chirac by not returning to France from his holiday in Canada missed an opportunity to engage in a mediated act of symbolic communication—the head of state as a father figure showing his concern for the welfare of the nation's most vulnerable citizens.

These two examples should alert us to the difficulty of making sweeping generalisations about the communicative power of the French executive to function as a 'primary definer' for the news media. In the first example the government was in proactive mode, largely in control of the story, while in the second example it was in reactive mode, responding to events outside its control. In addition to this distinction, two main weaknesses in the model are particularly relevant to our examination of the French case. First, the notion of 'primary definer' assumes that the executive is not subject to internal division and so speaks to journalists with one voice. The model 'does not take account of contention between official sources in trying to influence the construction of a story' (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994, p. 18). Second, the notion of 'primary definition' as put forward by Hall *et al.*, (1978) tends 'to overstate the passivity of the media as recipients of information from news sources' (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994, p. 19).

A Fragmented Executive

Let us begin our analysis by focusing on selected features of the political system of the Fifth Republic which have influenced the executive's capacity to act as a 'primary definer' for the news media. In particular, this section emphasises the division and fragmentation of the French executive, which it is argued are largely built into the governing structures of the system and which contribute to a certain political communication culture, irrespective of the political persuasions or partisan affiliations of key office-holders such as the president and prime minister.

The first notable aspect of the political system in this respect is the mix of presidential and parliamentary logics embedded in the institutional framework of the regime. At the apex is an executive diarchy consisting of a president and a prime minister, the former directly elected as head of state and the latter appointed by the president as head of government, which in turn is constitutionally responsible to parliament (Elgie, 2003, pp. 95–128). When the president and prime minister come from the same political coalition, their working relationship may well be close and relatively harmonious. However, this is by no means guaranteed. Presidential-prime ministerial disharmony may still occur even when both office-holders come from the same political party, as in the case of the highly publicised hostile relationship between President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Rocard, both Socialists, between 1988 and 1991 (Huchon, 1993).

Executive cohabitation exacerbates the likelihood both of substantive disagreement over policy and of conflict being symbolically manifested in the public domain, as was the case in the first 'short cohabitation' between President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Chirac (1986–1988) and in the latter months of the 'long

cohabitation' between President Chirac and Prime Minister Jospin (1997–2002). In both these cases the president and prime minister went on to be competing candidates in the presidential elections which brought the periods of cohabitation to an end. The closer the political cycle came to these elections, the more any pronouncements from the Élysée and Matignon in the war of press releases were interpreted by the media as part of the upcoming campaign battle. In short, while presidential-prime ministerial relations in the Fifth Republic have not necessarily been characterised by constant mutual hostility and resentment, the framework of the regime undoubtedly institutionalises greater potential for conflict at the top than is formally to be found in the executive arrangements of most other advanced democracies.

Second, the French executive as a whole is prone to a high degree of structural fragmentation which has a notable effect on its pretensions to function as a unified authority. Indeed, the fissiparous nature of the central governmental apparatus led a recent major study of policy coordination in France to relinquish the term 'core executive' in the singular in preference for the notion of 'core executives' so as better 'to emphasize the plurality of inner core authorities' (Hayward & Wright, 2002, p. 21). In similar fashion, Elgie illustrates his thesis regarding the myth of the strong French state by pointing to the 'basic and unavoidable conflicts within the government' which can itself be regarded as 'a conglomeration of competing Ministries' (Elgie, 2003, p. 80). It is clear, therefore, that the French executive is far from being a monolithic entity, acting with a unified will and a single sense of purpose; rather it is divided and segmented. The faultlines are rarely ideological. Sometimes they reflect the normal turf war between ministerial departments; sometimes they are underpinned by divisions over policy; and frequently they involve personality clashes fuelled by political ambition.

The third relevant feature of the political system is the coalition nature of many Fifth Republic governments. The multi-party nature of electoral competition means that Fifth Republic governments have frequently included representatives from different political parties. A classic recent example is the Jospin government of the 'plural left', which had ministers drawn from no fewer than five different political formations (Willerton & Carrier, 2005). In the run-up to national elections there is an in-built imperative on the part of each governmental party to differentiate itself from its 'competitor-partner' so as to maximise its electoral score and increase its potential for political leverage after the election. This was clearly demonstrated in the 2002 presidential contest, when each of the parties of the 'plural left' put up its own candidate, with devastating consequences in the first round for the left in general and Jospin in particular (Gaffney, 2004).

Finally, in contrast to some other advanced democracies it is not the norm in the Fifth Republic for the prime minister to combine the function of head of government with that of leader of the majority party. In 1997, for instance, Jospin made it clear on being appointed to the premiership that he did not wish to continue as leader of the Socialist party (Victor, 1999, p. 40). Neither Balladur in 1993 nor Raffarin in 2002

enjoyed the luxury of having to make this particular choice, since neither enjoyed the status of majority party leader prior to being appointed to the premiership. This is not just a technical point concerning the formal division of labour between the head of government on the one hand and the leader of the majority party on the other. Rather it represents another potential source of political and communicative discord at the heart of the system. At various points in the history of the Fifth Republic the leader of the majority party has been in a position of rivalry and even outright conflict with the prime minister and/or the president: three notable examples include Chirac as leader of the Gaullist party towards Prime Minister Barre and President Giscard d'Estaing between 1976 and 1981; Chirac towards Prime Minister Balladur between 1993 and 1995; and Sarkozy as leader of the UMP towards President Chirac since the end of 2004 (Gurrey, 2004).

Executive diarchy, experiences of cohabitation, ministerial turf wars, coalition government and the career rivalry engendered by presidential ambitions—the structures and functioning of the political system of the Fifth Republic contribute to a picture of division and disunity which makes coordination of executive communication both highly desirable and at the same time extremely difficult to achieve. The significant degree of pluralism and competition among official executive sources often gives rise to confused and conflicting messages and severely undermines any top-down ‘command and control’ news management strategy. Instead, coordination in French executive communication tends to remain loose at best, despite attempts to impose coherence by the Prime Minister’s office (Schrameck, 2001, p. 71; Ambiel, 2005, pp. 76–77).

The two most obvious manifestations of this fragmentation in public communication are, first, when government ministers deliberately leak against each other through the media and, second, when they unintentionally contradict each other about an aspect of government policy. Examples of both can be seen during the Raffarin premiership. In the spring of 2005, for example, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dominique de Villepin, placed critical remarks about the prime minister’s stewardship into the public sphere, thereby positioning himself as a prospective candidate for the premiership in the event of Raffarin’s dismissal by the president. Indeed, ministerial criticisms about the prime minister’s leadership made public via the news media have dogged much of Raffarin’s term of office, during which the government has leaked like the proverbial sieve as ministers and their henchmen have briefed against each other and the results made public through the media. Unintentional contradiction at the heart of government has also been in evidence. For instance, in 2002 at the very moment when the prime minister was assuring the nation of his intention to hold to the president’s promise to lower public taxes and at the same time reduce the financial burden on business, the Minister of Finance, Francis Mer, argued in an interview given to the financial newspaper *Les Échos* that the two measures were not simultaneously compatible. The prime minister’s office had apparently not been forewarned of the Finance Minister’s remarks and so had to engage in a subsequent damage limitation exercise with journalists (Ambiel, 2005, p. 126).

The Executive and the News Media

An examination of the interrelationship between the executive and the news media in France highlights certain particular features of the French case. For instance, the upper echelons of the French state are characterised by a specific type of interlinkage between the realms of politics and administration, marked by the colonisation of executive posts, both political and bureaucratic, by graduates of the *École Nationale d'Administration*. This technocratic trait of Fifth Republic politics has had two main consequences for executive communication.

First, whereas in some advanced democracies executive communication advisers regularly come from a professional media or public relations background, this is much less common in France, where they tend to be drawn from among the ranks of the administrative class. Neither a professional training in journalism nor experience in the news media is routinely viewed as an essential asset for ministerial communication advisers, a practice which may be linked to a certain contempt on the part of some technocrats for what is often rather dismissively referred to as 'la com'. Raffarin, with his own personal experience in marketing and communications, did initially appoint a communication adviser with a track record in the media—Dominique Ambiel had previously worked as a television producer. Moreover, although in his younger days he had been politically active on the Giscardian wing of the French right, Ambiel did *not* have the classic administrative background for a post in a ministerial *cabinet*. His appointment, therefore, went against rather than with the grain of the dominant bureaucratic culture in *cabinet* appointments. Even so, unlike say Bernard Ingham or Alistair Campbell, media advisers to British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair respectively, Ambiel did not have any notable journalistic experience.

Second, within government ministries, including the office of the prime minister, strategic communication activities are frequently undertaken as part of a wider portfolio of political, policy and administrative functions by the relevant minister's *directeur de cabinet*, who may also play a key role in providing background information to journalists (Huchon, 1993; Bazire, 1996; Schrameck, 2001). Conversely, the formal post of communication adviser is frequently low down the hierarchy of *cabinet* posts and the position is given less status than that accorded to political and policy advisers. Indeed, Prime Minister Balladur did not even have a communication adviser in his *cabinet* (Bazire, 1996, p. 203), symptomatic of his disdain for a strategic approach to political communication (Brigouleix, 1995, pp. 103–124). Once again, the position of Ambiel in the Raffarin *cabinet* between May 2002 and April 2004 goes against this generalisation, since as communication adviser he clearly enjoyed a significant status in the *cabinet* hierarchy, certainly higher than his counterpart during the previous premierships of Juppé and Jospin. Nonetheless, Ambiel is an exception to the rule; his influence with the prime minister was apparently not appreciated by those *cabinet* members from a more traditional bureaucratic background and even he was unable to fulfil the role of political communications supremo, a 'spin doctor-in-chief' with the combination of

professional background and political authority to raise the strategic status of communication at the heart of government.

In the early years of the Fifth Republic the executive derived considerable benefit in news management from two features of its interrelationship with the media: first, the government controlled television news output through the office of the Ministry of Information (Bourdon, 1990; Chalaby, 2002) and, second, there was a strong tradition of deference on the part of journalists working in the mainstream news media towards elite political actors, most notably the president. Over the intervening years both of these features have been subject to change. A gradual but irreversible liberalisation in the executive's relationship with television news started during the early years of the Pompidou presidency and, despite some serious setbacks, continued during the 1970s and 1980s. The abolition of the Ministry of Information in 1969, the break-up of the ORTF (Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française) in 1974, the end of the state monopoly in radio and television in 1982 and the establishment of a regulatory authority for broadcasting in the same year—all of these could be seen as part of a process of disengagement by the executive from a certain 'top-down' model of news media management. This change of emphasis was driven by the political recognition that the authoritarian Gaullist approach had by the end of the 1960s become counterproductive in terms of audience opinion formation. The expansion of broadcasting and the introduction of commercial television channels in the 1980s also made the 'command and control' model functionally impossible.

For elite politicians, however, television remained far too important a medium of political communication simply to be left in the hands of news editors and journalists. It has continued to be the primary source of national political information for most French citizens (Gerstlé, 2002, p. 94), graphically illustrated by the audience of 10 million viewers who regularly tune in to watch the TF1 evening news. The French executive, therefore, has continued to try to shape both the agenda and the framing of the medium's news output. After 1974 it sought to do this through the appointment of politically sympathetic journalists to key editorial posts, while since roughly the late 1980s the exertion of pressure and influence—always present previously—has tended to replace the imposition of even such indirect means of control.

As the example of Nicolas Sarkozy illustrates, personal links between elite politicians on the one hand and media proprietors and key news staff on the other are an important element in a process of interdependence characterised more by negotiation and exchange than command and control. Minister for the Budget and government spokesperson in the Balladur government, Sarkozy enjoys a close friendship with Martin Bouygues, the current owner of the commercial channel TF1. TF1 was widely regarded as having adopted a position in favour of Balladur in the run-up to the 1995 presidential election and in the wake of Chirac's victory the channel's director of news, Gérard Carreyrou, was forced out of his post in a settling of scores. In his book on his experience as Raffarin's communication adviser, Ambiel writes quite openly

about his close personal ties with leading figures in the news media such as the journalist Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, the TF1 news anchor Patrick Poivre d'Arvor and the vice-chairman of TF1 Etienne Mougéotte (Ambiel, 2005, pp. 47–48). None of this is particularly unusual. The extent of the cosy interlinkages between politicians and journalists is encapsulated in the title of a recent book by a former *Le Monde* journalist Daniel Carton, '*Bien entendu... c'est off*' (Carton, 2003). Carton's study also reminds us that much of the interdependence between politicians and journalists on a daily basis is backstage rather than front, informal rather than formal and covert rather than overt.

Media-savvy government ministers have also learnt to conform to the exigencies of television's news values to obtain favourable coverage. During his period as Minister of the Interior in the first two years of the Raffarin government, for example, Sarkozy was particularly adept at co-opting the news media as an integral weapon in his fight against *l'insécurité*, the dominant theme of the 2002 presidential election. The news media were mobilised to provide favourable coverage of ministerial initiatives in the fight against crime, with events deliberately staged for the television cameras in what were effectively uncritical publicity puffs for the new minister. In stark contrast to the period immediately prior to the 2002 election when television's dominant framing of the insecurity issue had concerned the apparent breakdown of the rule of law in French society, after the contest the preferred framing was one of the Raffarin government, but more particularly the Minister of the Interior, getting to grips with criminality 'on the ground'. With sections of the news media keen to try to exculpate themselves for their alleged contribution to preparing the ground for the electoral success of Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election, Sarkozy found many news media outlets only too willing to be co-opted as partners in the government-led war on crime.

In this case, successful news media management by Sarkozy supported the image the minister wished to portray of himself as a man of action who could be trusted to keep his promises. Quickly acquiring the reputation (in the media, where else?) as a consummate communication professional, Sarkozy has been particularly effective since 2002 in gaining access to the news media on his own terms. This has included appearances on 'heavy' political debate programmes such as *Cent minutes pour convaincre* (France 2) as well as on chat shows such as *Vivement Dimanche* (France 2) and *On ne peut pas plaire à tout le monde* (France 3). To bolster his self-presentation as a *présidentiable* in preparation for the 2007 election, Sarkozy has also managed his image through the controlled exposure of his spouse and immediate family, securing flattering coverage in 'soft' non-political outlets such as celebrity magazines as part of a coherent electoral 'outreach' strategy.

A Changing Journalistic Culture

If the executive's mode of interaction with television news has changed during the Fifth Republic, so too have journalists' attitudes towards elite political actors. Journalistic deference to the political class as a whole has been on the decline in France

in recent years. This change in media culture has been evident in the selection of stories and the tone of coverage. In particular the alleged (and in some cases proven) involvement of executive politicians from President Chirac downwards in a series of financial scandals has not just tarnished the reputation of the whole political class in the eyes of many voters, but also allowed the news media to forge a new relationship with a more active judiciary to expose political corruption and malpractice. Occasionally the results have been quite devastating for individual politicians. In 1993, for instance, a recent Socialist prime minister, Pierre Bérégovoy, committed suicide in the wake of media allegations concerning the funding of his purchase of a flat in Paris. At his funeral President Mitterrand condemned the media coverage in no uncertain terms (Favier & Martin-Roland, 1999, pp. 485–491).³

In general, this change in journalistic reporting has been more apparent in the print than broadcasting media. The newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné*, for instance, has always indulged in exposure journalism, taking pride in revealing the secrets of politicians in what it would claim to be the public interest. In the early 1970s, for example, publication of the tax returns of the then prime minister, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, contributed to his destabilisation within the ranks of the Gaullist party. The same newspaper's revelations in late 2004 of the cost of the Paris flat used by the Minister of Finance, Hervé Gaymard, and his family at the taxpayers' expense was followed in quick succession by a media 'feeding frenzy' and the minister's resignation.

The practice of critical exposure journalism has also spread into the *mainstream* print media. During the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, *Le Monde* adopted a highly adversarial stance towards President Mitterrand especially during his second term of office, which was particularly sullied by revelations of scandal, including his wartime association with the collaborationist Vichy regime. During the past decade the vendetta of the same newspaper against Chirac has become part and parcel of the French media scene (Péan & Cohen, 2003). Critical newspaper and magazine articles during Chirac's first presidential term also included revelations in *Paris Match* and *L'Express* about possible irregularities in the funding of his holidays.

In comparison with their colleagues in the print media, radio and television journalists have tended to retain a relatively deferential posture towards politicians and there is little equivalent of the hyper-adversarialism to be found in political interviews with leading British politicians conducted by John Humphrys or Jeremy Paxman. The French president in particular is frequently treated with kid gloves in formal interviews on the major networks, being fed 'soft' questions rather than subjected to rigorous interrogation. As illustrated by the example of the annual ritual of the 14 July television interview, journalists may even be given advice regarding the subjects 'on which the President would welcome the opportunity of speaking' (Hayward & Wright, 2002, p. 93). When in the 2000 interview with the president the journalists moved away from the agreed terrain to ask some potentially tough questions about allegations of financial wrong-doing at the Town Hall during Chirac's period as Mayor of Paris, the president refused to respond.

Interestingly, the journalists did not pursue the issue: 'It is not part of French culture to ask the same question five times. If the President will not reply, he will not reply' (Hayward & Wright, 2002, p. 93).

Yet the more one moves away from mainstream news programmes towards other television genres such as chat shows, the more one finds evidence of the decline in journalistic deference towards the political class. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the representation of politicians on the satirical sketch show, *Les Guignols de l'Info*.⁴ For instance, in the run-up to the first round of the 2002 presidential election, sketches involving a puppet character closely resembling Chirac and dressed in a Superman-type costume consistently portrayed the president as a political fixer economical with the truth. The *Supermenteur* character was presented engaging in feats of verbal doubletalk to get the 'real' Chirac puppet out of trouble, while allusions to the real-life president's involvement in financial double-dealing were rife.

The change in journalistic attitudes towards the political class in France has been driven by a number of factors. Some are sociopolitical: a widespread questioning of the representatives of authority (in religion and education as well as politics) across society; the *banalisation* or desacralisation of the role of the national politician in the face of what are often perceived by voters as increasingly supranational and global threats; the routinisation of *alternance*; and the decline of ideological conflict in electoral competition and the concomitant increase in the importance of a politician's personal qualities. Others are media centred: the entry into the profession of a new generation of journalists socialised in the post-68 climate; the spread of Anglo-American professional norms and standards both formally through courses in French journalism schools and informally through the general cross-border transfer of knowledge and practices; and the desire by some media outlets in competitive markets to tap into voter disillusionment and discontent so as to maintain their audiences.

Certainly, the impact of this decline in journalistic deference in the contemporary French media should not be overstated. For instance, French politicians remain largely immune from certain types of investigative journalism. This is particularly notable in the realm of sexual orientation and behaviour, where the mainstream French news media do not indulge in the exposure habits associated with tabloid journalism in other countries. In part this is because French politicians are given a significant degree of protection by legislation which severely restricts media intrusion into their private lives. In addition, the French journalistic and elite political cultures tend to regard certain aspects of a politician's private life as largely off-limits to media investigation.⁵

More generally, in cross-national comparative terms the mass of French journalists remain significantly less adversarial and less autonomous in their relationship with elite politicians than their Anglo-American counterparts. There is a relative absence of sensationalist or tabloid values in the mainstream news media in France and, apart from a few minority outlets, there is also less 'attack journalism' against leading political figures of the kind which has become commonplace in mainstream political journalism in Britain.⁶ If along with other representatives of the political

establishment members of the French executive are now treated less deferentially by journalists than in the past, they are still relatively spared in comparison with Anglo-American politicians.

Conclusion

Two principal conclusions emerge from the above analysis. First, in common with their counterparts in other contemporary democracies, French executive politicians and their advisers pay close attention to news media management. This element of commonality, however, should not lead to an underestimation of the particularities of the French experience, which include the framework of the political system, the layout of the media landscape and the norms of the journalistic culture. Thus while the executive in the Fifth Republic is subject to many of the same cross-national pressures felt by equivalent office-holders in other democracies, it is still possible to speak of a distinctive French approach to news management.

Second, this article has shown that despite the resources available in terms of expertise, organisational support and legitimacy, the French executive cannot simply impose its version of events as a 'primary definer' for the news media. In part this is to do with problems of the executive's own making, notably its propensity to internal fragmentation. In part, it is also linked to changes in the nature of the relationship between on the one hand executive office-holders acting as official sources and on the other hand political journalists as mediators in the relationship between politicians and the public. News management in contemporary France, therefore, should not be equated with Gaullist-style top-down control. Instead, executive actors have to negotiate with the news media—sometimes from a position of strength, but frequently not—to try to get their message across.

Notes

- [1] 'Gouverner, c'est choisir' is the phrase attributed to Pierre Mendès-France, prime minister for a few months during the regime of the Fourth Republic in the 1950s. *Gouverner, c'est paraître* (Cotteret, 1997) is the title of a book on political communication by a former member of the broadcasting regulatory authority, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel.
- [2] The sound bite 'Combattre le mal et combattre les causes du mal' was uttered by the Socialist party politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn on the issue of *l'insécurité* during a televised debate with Nicolas Sarkozy in the run-up to the 2002 presidential election (France 2, 18 Mar. 2002).
- [3] In his oration at Bérégovoy's funeral President Mitterrand attacked elements of the judiciary and the media: 'Toutes les explications du monde ne justifieront pas que l'on ait pu livrer aux chiens l'honneur d'un homme et finalement sa vie au prix d'un double manquement de ses accusateurs aux lois fondamentales de notre République, celles qui protègent la dignité et la liberté de chacun d'entre nous' (Favier & Martin-Roland, 1999, p. 491).
- [4] Broadcast every weekday early evening on Canal + in an unencrypted form and watched by a predominantly young audience, *Les Guignols* imitates a news format and is fronted by a puppet

character of Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, the anchorman on the main evening TF1 news. Over the many years in which it has been shown, this short programme has mercilessly poked fun at politicians, media personalities and show-business stars.

- [5] For example, in 1994 a photo of the illegitimate teenage daughter of President Mitterrand was published on the front cover of *Paris Match*. Journalists had known about the existence of Mazarine for some time, but the information had been considered part of the president's private life. It takes little effort to imagine how a similar circumstance would have been covered by the media in the UK or USA.
- [6] A recent example of 'attack journalism' was the newspaper onslaught directed against Dominique Baudis, former Mayor of Toulouse and currently chairman of the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel. Baudis was caught up in a court case involving allegations about sadomasochistic practices at group sex parties and had to endure 'trial by media' before the allegations against him were shown to be without foundation (Baudis, 2004).

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