

TWO

Politics:

Image versus Substance

Chapter 2 examines:

- Core themes and concepts
- The media-ization of politics
- The difference between political hype and policy making

Politics is a phenomenon intimately bound up with the process of communicating because being a politician is an intensely social (communicative) occupation, engaged in by those who organize and regulate social power-relationships and make decisions governing the allocation and distribution of scarce social resources. Carrying out these roles necessarily involves communicating (about choices). This communication may involve direct face-to-face discussions, or it may be mediated through intermediaries like emissaries, soldiers or journalists. Political communication is a multi-dimensional multi-form phenomenon, e.g. speech, body language, memoranda, media releases and political violence. The spectrum of communicative possibilities is endless – including one-on-one deal making with colleagues/allies; negotiating with opponents; making promises to win support; making threats (often only implicit) that rule breaking will incur sanctions (e.g. imprisonment); and threatening, or unleashing, coercion and violence. To be successful, politicians must master this repertoire of communicative possibilities and learn to deploy the communicative form appropriate to the challenge being faced.

Politics may always have been a communicative art. The question is – did twentieth-century mass communication alter the nature of political communication?

What is politics?

Resource scarcity has always characterized human existence, with no society (to date) able to satisfy the demands of all its members. This necessitates resource-allocation decision making – i.e. deciding who gets what; how resources and people

are organized; and who is licensed to take these decisions. Because such decisions produce winners and losers, mechanisms are also required to persuade people to accept the decisions (and the decision-making process itself), and/or enforce the decisions (on the losers). Further, since decisions affect people's life-chances (by impacting on who emerge as winners and losers), struggles ensue over who occupies key decision-making positions. Struggle also emerges over the values underpinning the organization and-allocation of resources. So at its most elemental, politics is:

- A decision-making process;
- A struggle over gaining access to the decision-making positions;
- The processes of legitimating and/or enforcing decisions.

Legitimation is the dimension of the process most obviously involving the media. However, in contemporary liberal democracies, the media's impact on political processes has become much wider than simply a legitimation mechanism.

Considering the above processes of decision making, resource allocation, enforcement and legitimation has led to the building of five theories of 'what constitutes politics'. Each emphasizes a particular aspect of the overall process. Each has value.

Pluralist theory is probably the most important of the five because it has become so hegemonic and 'commonsensical' in Anglo political thinking that pluralism's core ideals are now simply assumed to underpin the very nature of liberal democratic governance. An influential pluralist theorist is Dahl (1967). Pluralists argue that power and influence are dispersed among a wide array of society's interest groups. These interest groups (as well as individuals) all actively promote their own interests. The sum total of this pressure group activity drives democratic political systems, and prevents one group from becoming a dominant ruling elite. Pluralism incorporates two assumptions:

- That an active citizenry exists, with all interest groups being equally active in promoting their positions. In reality this does not occur. Bennett and Manheim (2001) have suggested that the 'death' of this aspect of pluralism is a recent phenomenon – a 'death' brought about by the growth of 'strategic political communication campaigns' geared to manipulation. They suggest that strategic communication has produced a shift from pluralism to neopluralism (2001: 284). It is a moot point whether this is a recent phenomenon or not;
- That a wide array of pressure groups competes. In competition they 'cancel each other out', so no one group can become dominant. However, situations exist where demographics favor one group, leading to, for example, one-party dominant democracies (Giliomee and Simkins, 1999).

A second understanding of governance is *public choice theory*, advocated by Downs (1957). This is closely related to pluralism. Downs argues that the two primary drivers of the political process are the desire of politicians to stay in power and the self-interest of voters. This compels politicians to try to maximize 'good publicity' (push 'popular' themes) and minimize 'bad publicity' (hide or disguise 'unpopular' themes).

A third approach is elite *theory*. A well-known advocate of this was Mills (1959), who argued (in contradistinction to pluralist theorists) that the USA's political system was run by a minority of the population who functioned as a ruling elite. Theorists like Pareto (1968) and Mosca (1939) have gone so far as to suggest that the division of society into dominant elites and subordinate masses is a universal and unalterable fact of human organization. Others have argued that elites arise contextually. Dahl, for example, has suggested that a recent contextual 'obstacle' to pluralist democracy is the emergence of the 'control of information' by policy elites in contemporary Western societies (Entman and Bennett, 2001: 468–9).

A fourth approach is the *class conflict model*, advocated by Marxists like Lenin (1969). Marxists argue that conflict between capitalists and the working class is inevitable. Capitalists (the 'bourgeoisie') use 'the state' to advance their interests, repress working-class interests, and promote ideologies serving to 'disguise' class domination. The working classes engage in a struggle to end class domination and capture the state. A more recent theory of social conflict, with some parallels to the Marxist approach, has been developed by feminists arguing that males use the political system to advance their gender interests and repress women. Women engage in a gender struggle to overthrow the dominance of male patriarchy.

A fifth theory is the *state-centered approach* to governance developed by Nordlinger (1981). For Nordlinger, 'the state' is as much a political actor as any other interest group within the (pluralist) political process. Hence the state-as-actor (and bureaucrats, as state functionaries) will significantly impact on policy formulation.

Each of the above has explanatory power, but none individually provides a comprehensive understanding of the political process. Liberal-pluralists, public choice and state-centered theorists have focused on decision making and legitimation but have been less inclined to consider struggle and enforcement issues. Struggle and enforcement have dominated the class conflict approach. A comprehensive understanding of politics requires attention be paid to decision making, struggle, legitimation and enforcement.

Humans have, over time, devised a range of different mechanisms for staffing and organizing political decision making, enforcement and legitimation. This resulted in a diversity of political systems including tribal governance, monarchies, aristocracies, oligarchies, dictatorships and democracies. This book will focus on the Western liberal democratic forms, especially the varieties that evolved in the Anglo world.

Liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is not a neat or static model of governance; rather it is an ever-evolving set of practices and processes. At heart, the process involves a rule-governed competition over gaining access to power, holding on to it and using it to achieve social outcomes. Power is sought because power holders can ensure (through policy formulation) that resource distribution occurs in accordance with their interests and those of their supporters. Within liberal democracies one gains access to power by winning elections. This requires politicians to persuade large numbers of people to vote for them, which means engaging in a game of impression

management. For many decades this has involved impression management via the **mass media** – politicians and the political organizations underwriting them have to grab the attention of potential voters (in an increasingly cluttered media environment); hold their attention; and deliver effective messages in ever-shrinking time-frames (now often limited to five-second sound-bites). This dimension of politics is concerned with image making, **myth** making and **hype**, directed at a mass audience who are frequently only marginally interested in politics and often, passive citizens. If the active political players are successful at impression management and hype, they can cajole sufficient numbers of their passive mass-citizenry to vote for them and thereby gain access to the sites where substantive politics happens – i.e. policy-making sites and the levers of power for executing policy.

So, successful politicians must learn to work simultaneously within two parallel political environments (each governed by their own practices and **discourses**) – one involves hype making, imagery and mythology; the other involves substantive policy making. But because these two political ‘worlds’ (of policy and hype) have to be coordinated, politicians must also learn to work within a third dimension of the political process, namely a ‘meta-world’ where the political game itself is planned and managed (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 The three dimensions of the political process

	(1) Policy	(2) Process management	(3) Hype
The three dimensions of politics:	‘Elite’ politics (geared to delivery)	‘Elite’ politics (geared to planning delivery and performance)	Mass’ politics ‘(geared to image and myth making to be consumed by voters)
Driven by:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cabinet • Policy staff • Bureaucrats • Judiciary • Intellectuals • Lobbyists • Diplomats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political party ‘insiders’ • Spin-doctors • Negotiators • Intelligence community • ‘Insider’ intellectuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journalists • Culture industry • Pollsters • Pundits and media commentators
Output:	<i>Output as ‘substantive’</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource allocation • Laws • Violence (internal) • Foreign policy (war and peace) • Service delivery 	<i>Output as ‘planning and coordination’</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventing beliefs and ideology • Inventing identity • Selecting politicians and staffers • Strategizing about ‘policy’ ‘hype’ and the ‘policy-hype’ relationship 	<i>Output as ‘image making’</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politician as celebrity • Identities to consume • Belief and ideology propagation • Articulating interests • Legitimacy ‘distraction’ (if needed)

(Continued)

Table 2.1 (Continued)

	(1) Policy	(2) Process management	(3) Hype
The three dimensions of politics:	'Elite' politics (geared to delivery)	'Elite' politics (geared to planning delivery and performance)	Mass' politics '(geared to image and myth making to be consumed by voters)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deal making (between interest groups) • Aggregating interests 		
Site (located in):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliament • Bureaucracy • Courts • Violence-making machinery 	Political elite 'back rooms' and 'elite' media	The culture industry and 'mass' media
	<i>Front-stage and back stage performances</i>	<i>Backstage performance (hidden from political outsiders)</i>	<i>Front-stage performance (to be consumed by political outsiders)</i>

Insiders, semi-insiders and outsiders

People can relate to the liberal democratic process in three ways – as insiders, semi-insiders or outsiders. The distinction is crucial for understanding the relationship between political processes and the media.

- *Insiders* are politically active, privy to policy debates, and engaged in both the 'policy' and 'hype' dimensions of the political game. Political insiders are always a small minority of the population. They play both 'elite politics' (i.e. strategizing, planning and policy, and organizing power) and 'mass politics' (i.e. impression management). However, because liberal democracy promotes the belief that mass citizens (voters) control the political system, the 'insider' elites must constantly deflect attention away from the existence of a two-tiered system of insiders (the ruling elite) and outsiders (the ruled). The existence of insiders is not equivalent to a conspiracy, because, firstly, intense competition for limited numbers of insider positions militates against conspiracy. Secondly, the political game has become a large industry, and the sheer size militates against conspiracy. Becoming an insider does not require 'conspiring', it requires choosing to become politically active, and then mastering the rules of the game (e.g. learning the practices and discourses of insider-engagement, and how to 'manage' outsiders and semi-insiders). Thirdly, the policy elite is divided into factions who, though they collaborate on some issues, are in competition with each other on other issues;
- *Semi-insiders* are aware of 'the game' political elites play, and aware of policy issues on the agenda, but are not privy to insider discussions of policy or strategy. Semi-insiders

are involved in 'mass politics' as *informed* spectators of the game. Political insiders include parliamentarians, policy-staffers, senior bureaucrats, senior intelligence advisors, senior members of the judiciary, political party insiders, spin-doctors and insider-intellectuals (advisors). Semi-insiders include (some) journalists, public opinion pollsters, political party 'outsiders' (rank-and-file party members), and analysts and **pundits** (intellectuals);

- *Political outsiders* are the citizens/electorate who are passive consumers of the myths, hype and images disseminated by the mass media. They consume what semi-insiders (such as journalists) and insiders (such as spin-doctors) construct and disseminate to them. The majority of citizens appear content to be passive outsiders – their participation in the political process being limited to voting occasionally for those candidates pre-selected and pre-packaged by political parties. (Many are choosing to not even engage in such limited 'participation' as ever-growing numbers are opting not to vote.) A minority of citizens and organized interest groups who become politically active may become semi-insiders due to their engagement with the political process. And, in some contexts, organized interest groups may become semi-insiders or even (temporary) insiders – for example, trade union leaders may become insiders when labor parties are in power. Interest groups trying to influence the policy process will often employ lobbyists because they know how to access insiders.

Ultimately, liberal democracy involves interplay between:

- A political elite of (active) 'insiders' who divide their time between politically 'substantive' work (e.g. policy formulation, and service and infrastructure delivery) and political 'hype' (e.g. impression management);
- Politically active 'semi-insiders' acting as 'stage-hands' or as a communicative bridge between the elite and masses;
- A (passive) mass of 'outsiders' who consume the work of insiders and semi-insiders.

Hence, liberal democracy requires considerable energy be expended in perception management geared towards the 'outsider' masses. So expertise in the use of mass communication (and hype) has become a key function of political management. In fact, a precondition for gaining (and retaining) access to the sites of 'substantive' politics is mastery of the arts of manufacturing-and-delivering successful 'hype'.

Hype

Hype is a colloquialism widely used within the media industry. 'Hype' involves stimulating an atmosphere of excitement or enthusiasm. This activity is carried out by politicians (trying to whip up support for themselves); sports coaches (trying to activate teams); choreographers of mass-entertainment (scripting mass sports events, pop concerts and so on); and publicists/advertisers (trying to make some product fashionable/popular). Hype has come to encode the notion that hype makers are aware they are creating publicity that is somehow 'false', a 'bluff', or a 'con-job'. Hence, professional hype makers (e.g. spin-doctors) are regarded as 'confidence tricksters' engaged in deliberately deceiving audiences to advantage themselves or

their employers. The end-result is seen as some sort of 'false' belief. In politics, such 'false belief' might be myth and **ideology**; celebrity (a manufactured 'face'); or it could be simply 'fluff' and distraction (aimed at setting the agendas of journalists and the public). The Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979) suggests that the **culture industry** professionalizes and industrializes hype making, and that manufactured hype is a core feature of commercial mass media production.

Politics: hype and substance

Gaining and retaining political power involves engaging in the complex business of **hegemony building**. Gramsci (1971) proposes that hegemony building involves three tasks:

- Building consent and **legitimacy** for society's dominant group/s, and building support for the interests and goals of the dominant. Getting the masses to accept as 'natural' the leadership, moral codes, practices and discourses of the dominant group/s. This legitimacy-making work is at its most obvious in the media and education systems;
- Organizing alliances and compromises between society's interest groups. This work is most visible within parliaments, where bargains are struck, deals are done and compromises identified;
- The deployment of coercion. For Gramsci, violence underpins all hegemonies. It may not be necessary to use violence against most citizens, but the threat of coercion is necessarily omnipresent – e.g. law enforcement (by the police and judicial system). Understanding the consequences of breaking the law is enough to deter most citizens from doing so. A successful hegemony also legitimates its deterrent 'forces' (police, courts and prisons).

Gramsci's notion of hegemony is useful for understanding governance but does not go far enough. Although Gramsci addresses the mix of hype and coercion, he fails to address the issue of 'substantive' delivery. Politicians would be unlikely to retain power if they relied exclusively on hype and/or violence – i.e. they must also deliver services and infrastructure; law and order (a 'safe' environment); social organization (facilitating economic activity); and defense from external threats. Successful 'substantive delivery' necessarily boosts legitimacy. So Gramsci's hegemony-building model needs modification to include four inter-related components: legitimacy-and-hype; politicking deals-and-alliances; substantive delivery; and coercion.

Hype and legitimacy are the central concerns of this book, but these are not seen as more important than other components. Instead, the work of impression management, plus building consent, legitimacy, beliefs and identities, and (when necessary) 'distraction', is necessarily enmeshed within the wider political game of policy work and managing the political process itself. The inter-relationship between all these dimensions of the political process can be shown diagrammatically (see Table 2.1). Actions taken in the 'hype-zone' (column 3) necessarily impact upon both policy and management decisions in columns 1 and 2. By the same token, front-stage performances within the hype-zone are related to backstage performances within the management-arena, as well as related to front- and backstage performances in the policy-arena.

Table 2.1 encodes four proposals about the nature of the political process. Each has implications for how we understand the relationship between the mass media and politics.

Two outputs of the political process

Proposal one

The political process is geared towards two core outputs – policy and impression management. Policy work is deemed to be the political process's 'substantive' dimension, wherein interests are aggregated and deals struck, and decisions (and laws) made concerning resource allocation, service and infrastructure delivery, and war and peace (Dye, 1998). The substantive dimension also involves executing decisions (e.g. resource allocation, service delivery, and enforcing and adjudicating laws). Although some policy formulation is performed off-stage, most policy output is in the public realm and hence attracts media attention. Much policy work is not done by politicians, but rather is carried out by civil servants and policy-staffers. The political process's other core output involves image making (including selling politicians; propagating beliefs, myths, ideologies and identities; and legitimating the system). This hype output has been substantially media-ized and is consequently intimately enmeshed with relationships between journalists and spin-doctors, and journalists and politicians. To some extent, the arrival of televisualized politics saw many politicians become more closely associated with 'image making' than 'policy making' – partly because the televisualized politics appears to have increasingly pushed politicians into the role of (on-stage) 'performance' or 'fronting' for the political machine, while policy-staffers and bureaucrats get on with the (back room) job of making the machine work. As a result of taking on this 'fronting' or 'façade' role, politicians assume the role of popular culture celebrities (see Chapter 6), which means that 'these days a politician's taste in music can assume as much importance as do their policies or their values' (Street, 2001: 273). In this regard, there is value in deploying Ervin Goffman's (1971) ideas on impression management; 'team-work' involved in maintaining suitable impressions; and front-stage and backstage performances. Goffman provides helpful analytical tools for unpacking the behavior of political actors. Especially useful is the idea of how waiters learn different behaviors for deployment (off-stage) in the kitchen as opposed to (on-stage) in the dining-area (1971: 118–21). The same holds true for those staffing the political machine.

Coordinating policy and hype

Proposal two

Policy and hype work, and the relationship between them, have to be coordinated, planned and strategized. This involves a third dimension of meta-level work, namely, managing the political process. Such management may not appear to be an

output, but is vital for enabling the policy and hype outputs. Teams of backstage political insiders, which now include communication professionals (see Chapter 5), perform this work. Western journalists (as semi-insiders) are fascinated with trying either to expose or double-guess this insider work. Some, such as Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1992), suggest that this has produced a form of political journalism focusing on 'politics as a competitive game' (see P. XX), which she argues has negatively impacted on how politics is now conducted (1992: ch. 6).

Two types of political practice

Proposal three

There are two types of political practice – elite politics and mass politics. Elite politics is geared towards policy making. Mass politics involves practices geared towards addressing, **steering** and cajoling voters. Mass politics conceptualizes citizens as politically passive – i.e. as a mass audience who can be manipulated, directed and (if need be) pacified and distracted. Mass politics does not take 'the masses' seriously, i.e. as people whose ideas need to be incorporated into policy making.

Rather, it treats them as semi-involved outsiders who, instead of being consulted, are at most 'polled' as a mass 'public', and thereafter addressed through carefully crafted messages aimed at influencing their voting behaviors. Walter Lippmann saw 'public opinion' as the outcome of the deliberate self-conscious art of persuasion (1965: 158). For Lippmann, the notion that public opinion emanated spontaneously within democracies was false (1965: 163). Instead, public opinion was the outcome of leaders cultivating symbols and stereotypes, designed to organize and lead the 'rank and file' (1965: 150). Lippmann argued that the USA's 'masses' (outsiders) were led by carefully crafted communication (designed by insiders). The result – discussed by a number of contributors to Bennett and Entman (2001) – is to 'manipulate' and 'shut' citizens out of policy processes. Successful strategic communication results in the rank and file (the led) acting in accordance with 'pictures' put into their heads (by leaders), i.e. 'public opinion' is manufactured into existence by a communicatively skilled elite. Insider politics takes two forms. One is the work of framing and executing policy. A second form involves strategic planning, staffing and organizing the political machine and drafting the hype it is hoped the media will pick up and disseminate.

When disputes arise among policy makers the policy elite sometimes turn to their PRs/spin-doctors who will be required to influence media content (i.e. 'steer' journalists) in order to mobilize public opinion. The faction of policy makers most successful at 'steering' public opinion in their direction will then use this mobilized public as leverage in their negotiations. Mobilizing/steering mass publics (through hype) during inter-fractional struggles between policy insiders is an important tool of policy elites. The masses (and journalists) are 'used' much as a chess player uses pawns.

Two types of media

Proposal four

Just as there are two types of political practice, so there two types of media—one used by the ‘information rich’, the other by the ‘information poor’:

- Political elites (of ‘active’ insiders) are information rich – they seek information from a diversity of elite-specialist (niche) media. However, political elites also pay attention to the mass media to monitor what coverage they (and their opponents) receive, and issues that journalists place onto the public agenda;
- Politicians deploy the mass media to communicate with voters. Most voters are information poor, passive ‘outsiders’ whose only engagement in the political process is to vote every few years for candidates presented to them by political parties. Most voters are now almost entirely dependent upon the mass media for information about the political process, candidates and issues. Given their reliance on mass media for political information, they become passive consumers of what journalists (semi-insiders) choose to report. For this reason, politicians and spin-doctors invest considerable energy trying to influence mass media agendas to generate stories useful to their cause.

The above distinctions are important when analyzing the relationship between politics and the media. They focus on three issues important for understanding political communication:

- Although ‘media-hype’ is an integral part of the political process, politics is not reducible to ‘hype’;
- There is a relationship between the substantive and hype dimensions of politics such that successful politicians must learn to juggle both;
- Although ‘hype’ and image-and-myth making are only one dimension of the political process, it is an important dimension, centrally implicated in the process of building and managing power.

This raises the question: what is the relationship between power and the media-hype? To answer this, one needs to consider where power comes from (see p. xx).

Sometimes spin-doctoring fails

Proposal five

The machinery of hype making is not seamless and does not always deliver the results intended by spin-doctors. Public relations professionals and spin-doctors would clearly prefer that their plans always work, but in reality the hype machinery is itself a complex patchwork of human relationships, differential abilities and struggles – it is staffed by people who sometimes make mistakes, betray their teams (e.g. leak information to the opposition), or who lose control of the symbiotic relationship they have with journalists. Further, spin-doctors have no control over

how their products will be decoded – their audiences are not routinely steered because aberrant **decoding** is always a possibility. In addition, since every politician has a spin machine (which competes with every other spin machine), they cannot all win all the time. Within this competition, some spin operations succeed and some fail.

The media as a power resource

Power is a slippery phenomenon with numerous definitions. For the purposes of this book, power will be seen as the capacity to get one's own way when interacting with other human beings. Weber (1978) expressed this best when saying that those with power are able 'to realize their own will even against the resistance of others'. Lukes added an interesting rider to this Weberian notion. Lukes (1974) noted that having power not only grants one the ability to have one's interests prevail over others, but is also the ability to stop conflicts from emerging by preventing oppositional agendas from even being raised. Broadly speaking, power emerges from three sources:

- Access to resources (to implement one's will and buy others);
- The occupation of certain social positions (which enhance one's capacity to get one's will complied with, and/or constrain the capacity of others to act);
- Language as a relation-structuring agent.

Politics involves a struggle to gain access to certain key social positions. Occupying such positions then grants access to a range of resources that can be used to further one's interests, and those of one's constituency. Gaining (and retaining) access to these positions (and resources) involves possessing two skills, namely an ability to manipulate the machinery of language making (e.g. the media) and/or the machinery of coercion. In some contexts coercive skills are fundamental for hegemony building. However, in Western liberal democracies, language-manipulation skills have become equally crucial for hegemonic success. In fact, it could be argued, the sites of institutionalized communication (e.g. mass media) have become absolutely crucial for building political power in Western liberal democracies.

A number of sites of institutionalized communication have been 'licensed' to manufacture and circulate dominant Western social discourses including:

- The media;
- Educational institutions;
- Parliaments;
- Courts of law.

For politicians, these sites are key cultural resources, and mechanisms for linguistically structuring social relationships. Consequently, access to these sites of institutionalized communication is struggled over. But access to such sites is controlled and limited, and often regulated by credentialism.

Arguably, the media became the most important cultural resource during the twentieth century because they were the central site for impression management and defining social position and status (e.g. 'publicity' has become a resource politicians must battle over). The media also became important agents for positioning people (through discourse). Media discourses are struggled over because they legitimate (or delegitimate) particular hierarchies of positions and the incumbents of such positions.

Given the importance the media assumed as sites of impression management, they became key 'king makers' and legitimators/de-legitimators from the second half of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, media institutions became prized possessions for those seeking power, or seeking to influence those with power. Owning or controlling a media institution empowers the owner to hire and fire meaning makers. From this can emerge a secondary power – power derivative of the capacity to make or break political leaders, and circulate, or suppress, information and ideas. Whether the ownership/control of media actually confers power will depend on the individuals concerned, the context they operate within, and other struggles taking place within that context. Power is not automatic, it is the outcome of struggle. However, such struggles are not fought on level playing fields, because certain players are advantaged (or disadvantaged) by having more (or less) access to the sources of power at the start of play. Pre-existent access to power or key social positions is necessarily an advantage in the next round of the struggle over power.

At heart, Table 2.1 suggests that those seeking to gain, and maintain, power within liberal democracies will (among other skills) need to master the ability to generate media hype. This is because successful (mass-) impression management, image making and myth making have become prerequisites for gaining access to those sites (and social positions) where policy formulation and implementation occur. Not surprisingly, this has led to the growth of institutionalized political impression management – i.e. the growth of an industry of professional agenda setters, impression managers, celebrity makers and myth makers. Nimmo and Combs (1990: 66) say this industry exists to construct fantasies. It is this spin industry which concerns this book.

The game of political impression management

Goffman (1971) argues that humans encounter each other through symbolic interactions, and these interactions are stage-managed. We manage the impressions ('faces') we present to others, just as others manage their presentations to us. We also collaborate in jointly managing the rules governing both our self-presentations, and the interactions between the various stage-managed 'selves'. For Goffman, impression management lies at the heart of being 'social'. The game of collectively stage-managing interactions between the different 'faces' (generated by impression management) is what makes a society possible. Essentially, rule-governed impression management constitutes the governing mechanism of 'polite' and 'ordered' society.

Becoming a politician means adopting a particular (rule-governed) 'face'. If this face bears little resemblance to the politicians' own inner convictions it could be said to constitute a 'mask'. To be a successful politician one has to project a mask deemed appropriate by the constituency one is trying to attract as supporters. In the OECD this face (or mask) increasingly has to suit the medium of television. The features of this face are governed, in the first instance, by the 'profile' of the political party to which the politician belongs. There was a time when decisions about the party's 'profile', and the 'faces' the party wished to project, were taken by party bosses. However, increasingly such decision making is shifting to teams of employed communication professionals. Teams of communication and 'image' consultants, spin-doctors, pollsters and advisors now 'guide' the impression management that politicians engage in (see Chapters 5 and 6). They specialize in scripting Goffmanesque front-stage performances. And in a world where people increasingly prefer visual communication, these communication professionals now often specialize in televisually 'inventing', scripting and 'projecting' the 'politician-as-face'. In the hands of these communication professionals, the (successful) politician-as-face becomes a manufactured celebrity – the carrier of an appropriate 'appearance', as carefully crafted as a pop star or fashion model.

Whether contemporary politics involves more impression management than in earlier times is a moot point. But even if no more impression management is now required, what has changed is the growth of a professionalized industry of impression managers who:

- Research the political environment to decide what sort of political face will be most popular;
- Invent' such a face;
- Groom and coach candidates to perform this role.

Significantly, professional communicators have thereby joined the ranks of party insiders, where they help to pre-select candidates based on judging how well aspirants can function in the role of politician-as-media-performer. Hence communication professionals have become part of the crucial process of deciding how the political machine is staffed. This necessarily impacts on the 'substantive' policy dimension of the political process because, although originally selected for their performance (hype) abilities, once elected, 'performers' get to impact on policy making. In this regard, the USA's governance model has advantages over the British model because the US President can construct his Cabinet from specialists who do not have to be selected for their ability to be elected (i.e. their media-performance abilities). However, the British system requires Cabinets be constructed from the ranks of those pre-selected and elected for their performance abilities (which are not necessarily the same abilities required for 'backstage' policy work).

But political impression management involves more than building 'faces', scripting individual political performances and constructing celebrities (see Chapters 5 and 6). Managing political communication also involves scripting and disseminating principles, ideas, sentiments and beliefs; and fostering the emergence of adherents (followers) for the mythologies and political identities thereby constructed. These mythologies and identities serve as lighthouses or touchstones for the masses (political

outsiders), helping them to navigate and orientate themselves in relation to the various political players. Skillful impression managers personalize messages by attaching them to politicians. Today's highly scripted political performances (which increasingly take the form of short sound-bites and photo opportunities) are the basis for simultaneously constructing celebrity-politicians and the belief systems they embody. Professional communicators, in a sense, also construct the followers, because followers effectively build their 'political identities' from meanings supplied by the texts and performances crafted by impression managers. The process of disseminating beliefs and myths, and constructing political identities lies at the heart of what Almond (1965) called 'political socialization'.

Making political followers is consequently an exercise in secondhand construction – the beliefs and identities of political outsiders are generally acquired by internalizing media messages produced by impression managers (insiders) and journalists (semi-insiders). Internalizing these messages necessarily involves voters reading and interpreting texts. This in turn involves a form of 'active' engagement with the political environment. However, it is a strangely passive 'activity' because it involves a dependence on texts produced by others, and agendas set by others. Most importantly it is 'passive' because the masses are positioned in a marginal relationship to society's core political decision making, knowledge making and information-producing centers.

For most people, this positioning is acceptable because politics is not an especially important concern in their lives. The majority of people appear content to be 'passive' – it is, after all, easier to allow others to construct ready-made 'explanations of the world' for one. So significantly, within liberal democracy, policy elites can safely conceptualize the masses as being 'passive' – they acquire their political identities by being followers. The only political action expected of them is to vote every few years when elections are called (by politically active insiders). And because they are not required to action their political beliefs or identities in any other way, there is no need to construct deep belief systems among political outsiders. In fact, shallow and fluid beliefs among the masses are more functional for pluralist-liberal democracies because they make the 'steering' job of political managers easier. So constructing liberal democracy's mass voters necessarily positions them as outsiders and passive, and is, as Habermas (1976: 142–3) noted, contemptuous of them.

Within this system of impression management, political journalists are semi-insiders. This creates a number of tensions and even contradiction for journalists. For one thing mainstream liberal journalists generally see themselves as members of a **Fourth Estate** (Schultz, 1998: ch. 2), whose job it is to act as 'watchdogs' over politicians. The Fourth Estate notion places journalists 'inside' the democratic political process – as active participants tasked with making sure the legislative, executive and judicial players do not abuse their power or become corrupt. The Fourth Estate idea is premised on three notions:

- Journalists are political insiders (or at least can gain access to the political system's inner-workings);
- The electorate are active political players;
- The media are able to operate autonomously of the government.

Journalist training inculcates the assumption that the Fourth Estate functions as the eyes and ears of a politically active electorate, and thereby ensures that electors control the elected, rather than the other way around. This Fourth Estate notion sits uncomfortably with the realities of 'insider/outsider' politics; the passivity of the mass of voters; the game of political impression management; and the way in which journalists and political players become mutually dependent upon each other. Journalists do not like to see themselves as susceptible to the impression management of spin-doctors, as the vehicles for selling stage-managed celebrity, or to convey scripted beliefs and identities to passive outsiders.

But when working as political journalists, those occupying these roles discover that:

- Political journalists are only semi-insiders;
- Political journalists need to work in a de facto symbiotic relationship with politicians because there is a mutual dependency between them (Negrine, 1994: 16);
- Political journalists need to work with the spin-doctors and political minders crafting the performances and 'faces' of politicians. These professional impression managers effectively become the interface between political insiders and journalists (as semi-insiders);
- Far from being Fourth Estate watchdogs, journalists are accomplices in the impression management game.

Perceptive journalists discover that they are simply part of the political system's hype machinery, and that the people they work with most closely – indeed symbiotically – are impression managers (who are insiders). These impression managers function *not* to inform journalists (semi-insiders) or voters (outsiders) of the real inner workings of the political machine, or of substantive policy issues. Habermas, in fact, suggested that those running liberal democracies necessarily try to obfuscate and disguise core policy-making processes in order to ensure that the steering and managing of the socio-economic system is carried out efficiently, and not interfered with by the demands of outsiders (1976: 111–24) – i.e. political outsiders (mass voters) are 'distracted' in the interests of 'rational' governance (1976: 122–43). Habermas suggested that the most serious challenge liberal governance could face would be if these 'passive masses' were to become active (and demanded to actually be involved in policy making). It is a moot point whether the masses are passive because:

- They are inherently disinclined to be active;
- They are content with what liberal democracy delivers (and hence have no spur to political activism);
- They are 'made' passive through socialization, education and media constructions;
- They are 'distracted' by the media;
- They are steered by an agenda-setting process.

It seems most likely that a mixture of all the above is involved. However, this book is primarily concerned with the issue of 'distraction'. Distracting the masses is achieved through the media by impression managers who use what they call 'puffery'

and 'fluff' to try to 'catch' journalists. If they succeed (which is not always the case), the media become complicit in the process of managing political perceptions. This has bred a cynicism among many journalists. Hence, in places like the USA, UK, Canada and Australia, an interesting new genre of political journalism has emerged – cynical journalism, where journalists now focus on reporting 'the game' of politics. This, as Jamieson (1992: ch. 7) has argued, could be seen as a cause of the (dysfunctional) spiral of cynicism currently infecting Anglo (and other) liberal democracies.

Impression management is an inescapable feature of politics. But is it merely a 'superstructural overlay' – a 'secondary game' politicians must play to attract voters during the elections and then distract them the rest of the time (so they do not get in the way of policy work)? Marxists tend to see 'ideology' (image making and myth making) in this way – i.e. as merely a superstructural overlay on top of the 'real' work of political/economic management. A more useful framework, however, is to recognize that although differences exist between the practices of 'substantive' and 'hype' of politics, this does not mean that 'substantive' politics is more important than 'hype' politics. Rather, Table 2.1 proposes that both are equally 'necessary', differentiated merely by division of labor requirements. Further, the two dimensions are not autonomous of each other – hype work necessarily impacts on the policy work and vice versa. Hence, those staffing one dimension must necessarily pay attention to what is being done in the other dimension.

However, even if impression management has always been a feature of politics, some suggest that the arrival of televised politics added a new dimension to the game, by deepening the impact of institutionalized mass communication on political processes. This led some – e.g. Entman (1989); Nimmo and Combs (1990); and Riddell (1998) – to suggest contemporary Western democratic politics has been media-ized.

What is media-ized politics?

Nimmo and Combs (1990: 18) propose that politics has become a secondhand reality for most Americans because they do not encounter politics in a direct (firsthand) manner, involving active participation. Instead, passive mass audiences encounter mediated politics via the media. This US media-ized form of politics is equally true of other OECD countries. Nimmo and Combs (1990: 18) go further, likening the contemporary experience of politics to Plato's prisoners in a cave (see Box 1.1) who acquiesce to their fate of being deprived from real-world experiences.

Nimmo and Combs propose that the majority of Americans now accept as normal the fact that they are confined to encountering politics as a set of secondhand (manipulated and distorted) media images, projected onto their cave walls by television (see Chapter 1). In fact, it might be suggested they are comfortable with being passive 'publics', led by elites who manufacture the images, stereotypes and mythologies they consume. The same could be said of most Britons, Canadians and Australians.

At heart, contemporary politics in Anglo liberal democracies is about *creating 'a public'*. Publics are assembled by professional 'public builders' from individuals who

are isolated and atomized by the practices and discourses of Western individualism and competition. The mass media assemble these publics. So the media function as a form of social glue, constructing and holding together public opinion. But these publics (containing millions of individuals) do not involve actual human interaction or communication between those incorporated into these 'publics'. The members of these publics do not know each other, or communicate with each other. They will never know each other, or communicate with each other. Yet publics can be 'brought together' by the mass media and can even be 'guided' (by the media) to carry out the same action (e.g. mourning the death of a celebrity they do not personally know, e.g. Princess Diana). Such 'publics' and 'public opinion' are the ultimate artificial 'hyper' construct. These publics have no real 'presence' because they are assembled in the ether of media representations. One cannot find 'a public', because it does not 'exist'. But one can find 'public opinion' by constructing it as an intellectual exercise (i.e. conducting public opinion surveys). Publics are assembled in, and through the media, by the demagoguery of the professional hype makers who know how to use the media to shift perceptions. The process involves **agenda setting** and **framing** – i.e. creating the perceptual frameworks through which 'publics' experience the world from one perspective only. Entman (1989: 77–8) argues that the key means to predispose people to thinking in a certain way is to influence what they think about by providing them with ready-made 'schematas' or frameworks. Such frameworks serve to guide the subsequent behavior of media audiences and so turn them into publics (who behave 'collectively', despite being isolated individuals).

Such demagogic power derives from the widespread atomization (and hence isolation) of individuals in Western society. Instead of interacting with other human beings, isolated individuals now experience a form of manufactured substitute 'pseudo-interaction' received through mass media messages – i.e. they receive media-*ted* experience. For political 'outsiders' few possibilities exist for cross-checking and sharing alternative opinions because these 'outsider' individuals have been atomized and the media turned into their primary vehicle for 'interacting'. The result is a dramatic media-ization of experience wherein individuals become 'a public' of passive followers, 'guided' by the limited agendas presented to them by the media. The result is (passive) publics, instead of (actively engaged) citizens. The possibilities for manipulating such media-*ted* (passive) outsiders are countless. Building this media-*ted* public opinion has fostered a symbiotic relationship between different interests – i.e. the public opinion industry is good for:

- Policy elites (insiders) who wish to make policy with as little interference from the (outsider) masses as possible;
- Media workers because it provides them with employment;
- Media proprietors because it has generated a profitable industry.

Public opinion-driven politics is at heart media-ized politics – where the media machine, and the demagogue's arts of manipulating mass media output have become central to governance. Entman (1989) argues that this manipulation has produced democracy without citizens. In place of active citizens we have publics – 'publics'

who are 'herded' and 'steered' by skilled media operators. This steering process 'delivers' voters; and provides policy makers with as much freedom as possible from 'outsider' pressures. Riddell (1998: 8) contends that this has seen the focus of political debate shift away from parliaments to television studios. He argues that British politicians now invest more energy into their televisual performances outside the Houses of Parliament on College Green ('sound-bite heaven') or at Millbank (BBC, ITN and Sky) studios than into working within the House of Commons (1998: 9). Seaton (1998: 117) agrees with Riddell. Both Riddell and Seaton suggest that media performance has 'become' politics – i.e. media-ized politics. However, what Riddell and Seaton overlook is that television studios are still only one part of the political process (albeit, an important one). The media-ization of political performance may have reduced the importance of parliamentary performances, but media-ization has not absorbed the policy-making process. Instead, it appears, policy making has been largely shifted out of parliaments in order that, as far as possible, policy is not corrupted by media attention. Policy has been located backstage as a function of executives (cabinets, prime ministers' departments, the White House and so on). So policy is now an activity carried out by political behind-the-sceners, not political performers. A division of labor exists: politicians-as-performers work on stage (in television studios, and to a lesser extent in parliaments); while politicians-as-policy-makers work backstage (with their policy staff, bureaucrats, advisors and lobbyists). Riddell and Seaton do a good job examining the 'on-screen' politicians-as-performers, but fail to consider the 'off-screen' policy dimension.

It seems fair to say that media performance has become a core feature of contemporary political processes, so that even policy workers must pay attention to the media. But does media-ization necessarily translate into a new political genre, transformed by the workings of the hype-machine? This would seem to be the case for four reasons.

Firstly, a spin industry of professional impression managers has been integrated into the political machine (see Chapter 5). They have impacted on the political process by seeking out the most cost-effective ways of delivering success to their employers. This drove politics to becoming televisualized (see p. xxx). Television is a hype-maker's dream medium because its visualness, and the medium's preference for movement and sensation, produce an urgency, immediacy and persuasiveness that other media lack. Television also encourages easily digestible simplifications, stereotypes and clichés. In societies where television has become the dominant medium, culture itself has been visualized, with other media forms increasingly adopting visualized styles. The spin industry quickly recognized the persuasive possibilities visualized culture held when trying to manipulate the masses through hype. The result has been a visualization of political performance, with US politicians leading the way. This produced a 'hype industry' of televisualized spin-doctoring and agenda setting.

Secondly, the televisualization of politics altered the sort of people selected to be performance-politicians (see Chapter 6). What is now required is an ability to wear whatever 'face' ('mask') one's minders require; to perform in front of television cameras; to look attractive and/or 'leader-like' on screen; to

speak in sound-bites; and preferably say nothing substantive when journalists are around. To be pre-selected as a politician now requires displaying an understanding of, and willingness to behave in accordance with, the requirements of hyped politics, and to stick to the script provided by impression managers. This has impacted on the political machine's staffing profile, so that, it can be argued, televisualization impacts not only upon the hype dimension but also upon the policy dimension of the political process.

Thirdly, the growth of a spin industry generated (an institutionalized) symbiotic relationship between spin-doctors and journalists. But because such a symbiosis clashes with journalism's (Fourth Estate) professional ideology (see Chapter 4), political journalists experienced dissonance between the reality of their daily work (as semi-insiders within a hype machine) and the mythology of themselves as 'truth-finders'. To resolve this dissonance cynical journalists 'expose' the nature of the political 'game' and its 'hype' to their audiences. This appears to be generating a political malaise in some Western societies because, instead of being part of a communication process legitimating the political process, cynical journalists have become de-legitimators of the system. This is dysfunctional for liberal democracy. How liberal democracy will resolve this problem, born of media-ization gone wrong, is as yet unclear; although the way Obama's electoral spin-team generated a sense of grassroots populism suggests a possible solution.

Fourthly, media-izing politics generated a re-alignment in the way power was distributed within the political machine. Liberal democracy was born at the turn of the nineteenth century as an **oligarchy**, with power residing in the hands of a *bourgeois/burgher* (middle class) elite. This elite organized its decision making in parliaments. By the late nineteenth century, a widened franchise created a potential danger for the middle classes that they might lose political control. Ewen (1996) contends that this danger stimulated the creation of public relations (PR) in the USA. Ewen argues that the American middle classes created PR as a mechanism to try to manipulate the masses. This PR mechanism (designed to 'steer' and control the masses and avoid the use of violence), grew during the twentieth century into a large spin industry. By the turn of the century the spin-doctors were insiders within the political machine. Furthermore, the growing importance of political spin-doctoring produced an observable bifurcation in the machinery of governance – with part of the political machine specializing in agenda-setting impression management-and-hype, and the other half specializing in policy formulation. This bifurcation saw a decision-making move into those back rooms inhabited by cabinet ministers and their policy-staffers, and out of 'public spaces' (such as televised parliaments). The shift of real decision making away from parliaments disenfranchised not only the masses, but also the middle classes, because power has increasingly moved into the hands of a political technocrat elite – i.e. policy technocrats and communication technocrats.