Parliaments and the Media

A Changing Relationship?

Ralph Negrine

ABSTRACT

How has the media coverage of parliaments and politics changed in the last decade? This article seeks to answer this question by exploring the media coverage of parliament and politics in Britain and Germany in 1986 and 1996. Drawing on an analysis of a range of newspapers and broadcast media from these two years, as well as interviews with practitioners and politicians, this article begins to identify the extent, and diverse nature, of those changes and their significance in relation to the degree of access now granted to political actors, to the range of subjects now covered and to the main locations of political coverage. This article argues, finally, that the issues this research raises encompass questions about democracy and citizenship.

Key Words British parliament, coverage of parliaments, German parliament, media, politics

Introduction

At a conference on 'Parliaments and the Mass Media' held in Athens in October 1998, the Presidents of the Belgian, Greek and Italian parliaments were unanimous in emphasizing the importance of the relationship between the two institutions because it affected 'the future of parliamentary democracy, as well as the future of political journalism' (Violante, 1998: 1).

Ralph Negrine is Director and Head of Department at the Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 104 Regent Road, Leicester LE1 7LT, UK. [email: rxn@le.ac.uk]

European Journal of Communication Copyright © 1999 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol 14(3): 325–352. [0267–3231(199909)14:3;325–352;009406]

Though there were accusations of media shortcomings — thus, 'political journalism often hovers between faithful reporting and the sensationalist presentation of particular events' — speakers' comments were often tempered by a realization that parliaments themselves were sometimes to blame for the resulting media coverage. As the President of the Italian parliament observed:

> There is only one recipe for eliminating the communication gap [between parliament and the public] . . . and that is to proceed more rapidly and resolutely in the direction of modulating the messages in such a way as to take into account the needs and peculiarities of the media system, of bearing in mind that reporters and press organs do not confine themselves to recording our words and deeds but act in accordance with criteria, priorities and patterns that we must not ignore. (Violante, 1998: 3)

Not all political actors would accept this balanced view of the problem but it is nonetheless worth noting two departures from past concerns. The first, and the most obvious one, was the general acceptance that since the routines, practices and traditions of parliamentary institutions were not geared to the needs of the media, it would not be surprising if the media found little of interest within these institutions. The second departure was the (sometimes grudging) acceptance that television cameras in parliamentary institutions could have beneficial effects. The President of the French Senate (1998: 19) was quoted as saying, 'Ces transmissions ont un effect bénéfique sur l'organisation des débats, en obligeant les parlementaires a s'adapter aux impératifs du temps médiatiques.' The real issues revolved around the adequacy of the coverage and how parliament's presence in the media could be enhanced.

Here, then, was a more 'rounded' appreciation of the complex nature of the relationship between 'parliaments and the mass media' and of the need for both institutions to consider the wider objective of the creation of an informed democracy. In this respect, the tone and substance of these interventions were unlike some recent British interventions which were much more baldly stated. Thus, the 1993 research paper produced for the then Labour Shadow Home Secretary Jack Straw on the decline of parliamentary coverage in the press (Straw, 1993) makes no significant references to processes and routines within parliament itself which could be changed in order to encourage media interest. The finger was firmly pointing at the media as the cause of parliament's increasing invisibility. In a similar vein, when the broadcaster Sheena McDonald (1994) suggested that much of broadcast political journalism was 'shadow-boxing' and that 'the speeches, debates and committee meetings which enable their shadow-boxing get very short shrift', she was making

implicit assumptions about where the 'blame' lay. Yet these positions, and indeed the positions of the European parliamentarians quoted earlier, beg the bigger question of whether more coverage of parliaments — whether in print or in broadcast form — is necessarily either *better* parliamentary coverage or better *political* coverage than is currently available. A point to which we return later in our discussion.

Casting aside these differences in emphasis, it is possible to identify two common features in many of these expressions of concern about the contemporary relationship between parliaments and the mass media, namely a view that parliamentary coverage is not 'what it used to be' and that parliaments have significantly declined in importance as key locations, and sources, of political news and events. But how valid are these views?

Drawing on a study of the media coverage of parliamentary institutions in Britain and Germany, this article argues that the nature of parliamentary coverage has been undergoing continual change for well over a century and that one of the contemporary consequences of that change has been to marginalize parliaments as locations and sources of political news. The article is divided into four parts. The first part offers a brief historical exploration of the developing relationship between these two institutions; the second part focuses on the evidence of the displacement of parliaments as a source of news and events; the third part examines some of the possible reasons for these processes of displacement, and the fourth and final part turns to possible ways in which the gap between parliaments and the public could be bridged in the future.

Parliamentary coverage in the press — a history of decline

The research paper produced for Jack Straw offers a useful point of entry into an examination of the changing nature of parliamentary coverage. Two of its conclusions are worth quoting in full because they sketch the changing nature of that coverage in the British broadsheet press.

> 1. The study indicates that in the past five years [i.e. 1988–93], systematic daily reporting of Parliamentary debates in the broadsheet press has been significantly reduced, in some case to a quarter of what it was before.
> 2. Between 1933, and 1988, coverage of Parliamentary debates took between 400 and 800 lines in *The Times*, and between 300 and 700 lines in the *Guardian*. By 1992 coverage had declined to fewer than 100 lines, in both papers. (Straw, 1993: 2)

When placed in an historical context, these conclusions are less stark than they initially appear. Parliamentary coverage was never as secure in the

British broadsheet (political) press as is often implied by those who hark back to a 'golden age' and there is a considerable body of evidence which shows that it has undergone significant changes in the last 100 years. Stephen Koss, for example, has written that it 'was a self-fulfilling prophecy of the "new journalism" [of the 1880s] . . . that the newspaper-reading public, as it expanded, became proportionately less politically minded, and indeed impatient with the parliamentary transactions that had been a fixation of the older press' (Koss, 1990: 5). One consequence of this, it could be argued, was that newspapers downgraded the importance of parliamentary coverage. According to Alan Lee,

> . . . the provision of [politicians' speeches] was an expensive and, in terms of circulation, an unrewarding affair. [Newspapers] began, therefore, to rely increasingly on the services of the [news] agencies. The agencies relied on being able to sell their reports profitably. At first they offered a choice of 'verbatim', 'full' and 'summary' reports . . . By the 1880s the 'verbatim' was becoming rare. (Lee, 1976: 123)

This century would see similar expressions of concern about the place of parliamentary reporting in the press. Writing in 1938, Wickham Steed remarked that 'the space now given to politics has steadily declined. . . . Now Parliamentary reports are condensed and treated under different headings; and in the most widely-circulated newspapers Parliamentary speeches are hardly reported at all' (Steed, 1938: 170). Such concerns surfaced again in the immediate postwar period and were a key argument in favour of the televising of the British parliament (see Negrine, 1998: 111–12) and they re-emerged in the 1970s (see Seymour-Ure, 1979) and, as we have already seen, in the 1990s.

Similar changes in the nature of coverage of parliamentary institutions can also be traced in, for example, the US, Germany and France. In his work on the American press on Capitol Hill, Timothy Cook has argued that 'by the end of the [19th] century' the 'earlier preference for debates, recorded with little interpretation or comment' had been overtaken by the emergence of the correspondent 'as one who would make sense of the goings-on of Capitol Hill for a mass audience that was perceived to demand colour and excitement more than details of policy disputes' (Cook, 1989: 22).

Similar shifts away from extensive gallery-style reporting of debates have been recorded in Germany. Oberreuter has claimed that press reporting of parliamentary proceedings was carried on a daily basis in the 19th century, 'under a permanently established column in the press' but that 'Beginning with the Weimar Republic, the press started to select

subject matter and debate according to their importance' (Oberreuter, 1990: 527). By 1971, Hennis could write (about West Germany) that, 'we know, of course, that the times are long past when the great newspapers would publish full-page parliamentary reports' (Hennis, 1971: 77). By the 1990s, press reports of the Bundestag were integrated into the normal domestic political coverage of the newspapers.

In respect to France, a delegate to an Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in the late 1960s pointed out that only the small circulation *Le Monde* devoted 'two pages a day to verbatim reports of parliamentary proceedings' (Wilson, 1970: 31), but by the 1980s, even *Le Monde* had ceased to cover proceedings as it had done previously and the space devoted to such coverage had contracted (Padioleau, 1985: 238).

Within such broad patterns of social, political and historical change, it may be impossible to pinpoint the precise moments or causes of change. As these extracts suggest, the changes which have taken place have spanned many decades. As for causes, a combination of factors clearly need to be considered. These include, as we shall see, the changing organizational needs of the press and the media more generally, the changing roles of parliaments in political systems and, finally, the evolving relationship between the media and parliaments.

It would be a mistake, however, to see this pattern of historical change as no more than evidence of one institution adapting to change in another. For hidden within the expressions of concern about parliamentary coverage lies a much more significant set of statements about the perceived importance of the relationship between the press and parliaments for *both* these institutions. In these, parliaments are at the centre of political systems, core political institutions and key sources of political news and events. The 'quality' and the 'seriousness' of newspapers are then judged in the light of their treatment and coverage of parliament and of politics generally. This sort of connection was, after all, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the 'political press' (see Koss, 1990) and sustains the distinctions between the 'elite' and 'popular' press. One can thus read into the concerns of the likes of Jack Straw, among others, not simply a specific concern about the physical reduction in the media coverage of parliament but a much more general concern about the transformation of parliament from a core institution into a much more marginal one. By extension, one can also read into these statements a concern about the changing nature of the press from a 'serious' one into a 'tabloid' or 'depoliticized' press.

We can observe these transformations in a number of ways. First, in the statements of newspaper editors and, second, in an appreciation

of the symbolic significance of the dedicated parliamentary page in newspapers.

With respect to the former, in 1995 a former editor of *The Times*, *the* newspaper of record, explained to the Committee on Standards in Public Life why he had abandoned the parliamentary page in the early 1990s. He found few people, he said, other than MPs, who read it. He continued:

> We are not there to provide a public service for a particular profession or, for that matter, for a particular chamber. . . . Newspapers are about providing people with news. (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995: 7)

Parliament would no longer be privileged. It would have to fight for news space, just like everybody else.

In an interview with the author, a former editor of a different national broadsheet paper made similar comments about parliament's new found role in political life when he observed that:

> . . . there are only a very small number of [parliamentary] debates which actually matter. The rest is the outward and visible show, but in a newspaper you cannot do everything on *its own self-evaluation*. (Interview, 1997; emphasis in original)

As for the dedicated parliamentary page, even scaled down coverage from a high point in a mythical 'golden age' had a symbolic significance. It confirmed that parliament had a unique status and that it continued to be a focus for political news and events. No other institution was covered in that particular way and no other institution was accorded that degree of deference and importance. Abandoning that dedicated space in the press could thus be interpreted as a relegation in the importance of parliament, as the words of the editors cited confirm.

Here, then, was a fracturing of the relationship which had previously existed between the British parliament and the press. Parliament had ceased to be at the centre of political news gathering, and the press, for its part, had to adjust its coverage of parliamentary and political affairs accordingly. That process of adjustment, and its consequences, emerge quite clearly in the results of our study.

Changes in the coverage of parliament

How can we identify a transformation in the role of parliament as a source of news and events and what would its effects be on newspapers and on parliament? This section examines the changes in the press coverage of parliament and television's coverage of parliament. One reason for

separating the two is that these media have different points of origin, and hence relationships, with the parliamentary institutions in question. Consequently, they highlight different concerns and issues.

Press coverage of parliament

In order to make an assessment of the transformation of parliament as a source of news and events and the effect of that on newspapers and parliament, a sample of newspapers from the mid-1980s and from the mid-1990s was analysed. These periods were chosen to reflect different 'moments' in the lives of newspapers. In the mid-1980s most British newspapers consisted of one section only and were not significantly different in design, layout and use of colour than in 1976. By 1996, most of the newspapers came in sections, used colour, used different designs and layouts and were in the midst of a price war. Significant changes in newspapers had, therefore, taken place between these two periods and these would be reflected in the data. Also, the years straddled the period when *The Times* changed its own pattern of parliamentary coverage; a practice soon taken up by the other broadsheets.

Fifteen issues of *The Guardian*, *Financial Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* from 1986 and 1996 were sampled on a rolling week basis; for comparison a similar sample of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*) and the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* (*SDZ*) was also analysed.[1] All these newspapers were 'broadsheet' or 'elite' papers and all had significant circulations within their respective countries. The circulation of *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, was around 1.2 million copies per day in 1986. However, the *Financial Times* differed from the other newspapers in having a much more focused interest in economic and financial news. In general, these newspapers made a considerable amount of political information available to their readers and a decline in such coverage could become a cause of concern and further evidence of newspapers abandoning 'serious' news coverage or of 'dumbing down' their political content.

For the purpose of coding the data, a 'parliamentary and political' news item was defined as any *news* item in the main section of the newspaper which related to parliament or which featured an MP in any of her or his parliamentary roles, or any items where an MP was the major focus of the story in their capacity either as a member of a political party or as a private individual.[2]

Given the existing research in this field (see Franklin, 1995, 1997), we did expect to find a decline in parliamentary coverage but it was

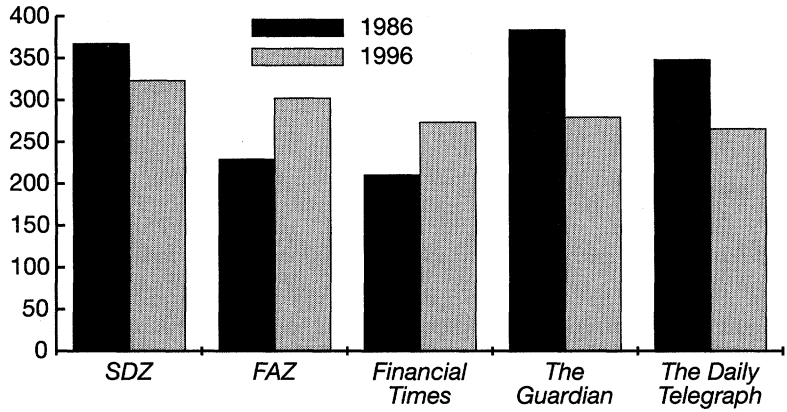


Figure 1 All items coded for British and German newspapers

nevertheless also important to examine whether or not one could identify the transformation in parliament's position, as described earlier.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the total number of items coded; for comparison, the data from the analysis of the German newspapers are included. Although this figure shows that there is no consistent pattern across the five newspapers, it does emphasize the large reductions in the number of items coded in the case of two British newspapers. These reductions range between 24 percent (for the *Telegraph*) and 27 percent (for *The Guardian*). Interestingly, in a different research project currently running, which uses the same methods to analyse parliamentary and political news in British newspapers in *1966*, about 300 items have been coded in *only 10 issues* of *The Guardian* (compared with a total of 383 items in *15 issues* in 1986).[3] This further confirms the longer term changes which have taken place in parliamentary and political coverage. In one of the two German papers, the *SDZ*, there was a reduction in the number of items coded but, at 11 percent, this was much smaller than the changes recorded in the British press. By contrast, the other newspapers recorded increases in the total number of 'parliamentary and political' items: in the case of the *Financial Times* this increase can be accounted for by a growing focus on political news so as to supplement, and broaden, its financial and economic agenda.

Can the change recorded in the general data provide a better understanding of the changing patterns of coverage? In the case of the British data — but not for the German data — each coded item was also placed into one of three separate categories. These were:

- Parliamentary items, i.e. items which appeared on the dedicated parliamentary page or section of the newspapers;
- Primary political items, i.e. items which involved MPs in a major capacity which appeared on the news pages;
- Secondary political items, i.e. items which involved MPs in a minor capacity which appeared on the news pages.

With these categories, it was thus possible to distinguish between changes in parliamentary coverage as represented by items on the *parliamentary page* of the broadsheet papers (parliamentary items) and other forms of political reporting (primary and secondary political items). The former would usually consist of a shortened transcript of parliamentary debates, while the latter would be made up of more general political news taking place outside the confines of the parliamentary institution, although not necessarily unrelated to it. For example, a primary political news item on the front page might draw on events, including statements, from debates in the House of Commons.

It follows, then, that there could be changes in both these categories with different consequences. A decline in parliamentary coverage, as defined here, need not necessarily be accompanied by a decline in more general forms of political coverage. The opposite may, in fact, be the case: as parliament declines in importance as a source of news, other forms and locations of political coverage may increase in importance. Similarly, there could be changes *within* parliamentary coverage with, say, a greater emphasis on parliamentary committees but a lessened interest in the second chamber, the Lords. Furthermore, and from the reader's point of view, increased parliamentary coverage may amount to no more than mere extracts from debates with neither explanation nor guidance as to their significance: a different form of political coverage which gave background and interpretation with, or without, reference to goings on in parliament might in fact be preferable. That changes can take place within, and across, such forms of coverage certainly suggests that one should closely question those who would seek to reinstate the primacy of parliament as a source and location of news and/or reintroduce a certain form of parliamentary coverage.

Figure 2 gives a detailed breakdown of parliamentary and political coverage in the British newspaper sample. Two points immediately stand out. The first is the obvious disappearance of the parliamentary page from *The Guardian* and the *Telegraph* in 1996. This is in line with the views of Simon Jenkins (see earlier) and Figure 2 shows the impact of that decision

to abandon the gallery style of reporting debates in favour of other forms of political coverage. The second point to note is the decrease in the number of primarily political items for *The Guardian* and the *Telegraph* and the small increase in secondary political items in the case of the latter. The overall effect is still a reduction in the total number of items coded (see Figure 1) so confirming bigger changes in the coverage of politics in these newspapers than a simple readjustment across different forms of coverage would suggest. As the *Financial Times* never had a parliamentary page, the change recorded here does not apply to it in the same way. Nevertheless, Figure 2 shows how it retained its focus on

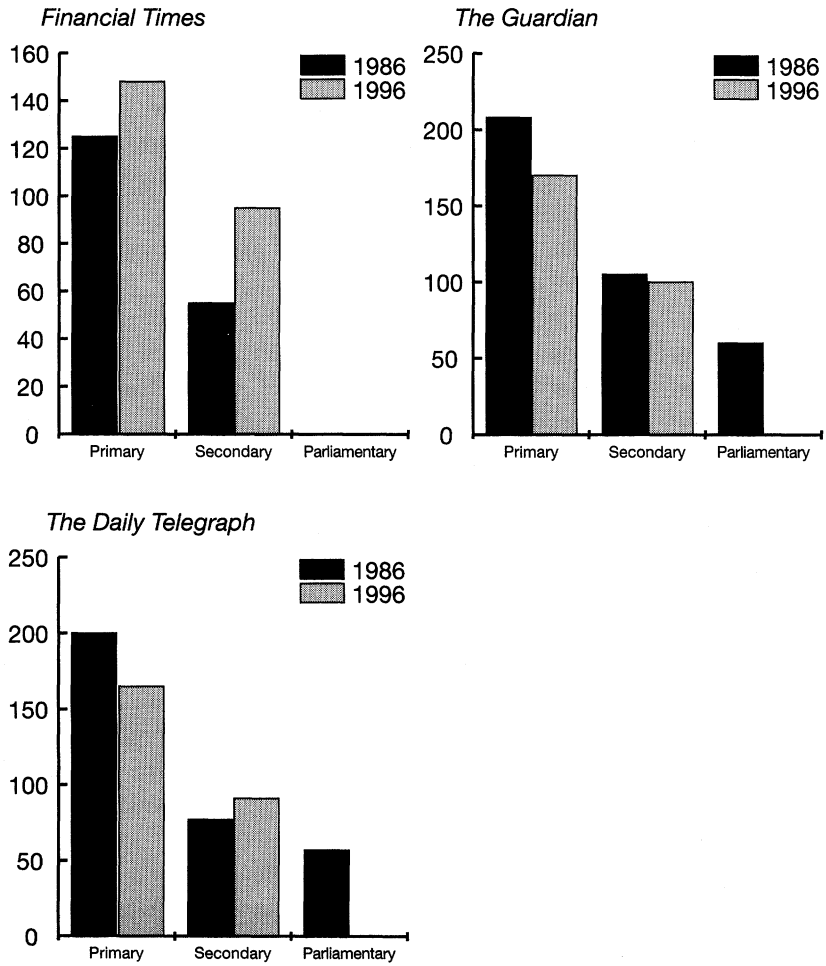


Figure 2 Distribution of items in three British newspapers

economic and financial news but at the same time widened its outlook to include more political coverage.

More detailed analysis of the data further confirms the change in parliament's status as a source of news and events, particularly for *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Much of the rest of this analysis will be focusing on these two broadsheet papers because they have high circulations and are considered to be important sources for news across the right and left of the political spectrum in British politics. The change in parliament's status can be seen in respect of (1) the subjects and locations of the parliamentary and political items, (2) the impact of the loss of the parliamentary page and (3) the impact on the numbers of MPs given access to news pages.

Subjects and locations of items Are there changes in the subjects of the items coded which begin to identify a changed set of news priorities? With the sample years a decade apart, it is obvious that certain subjects will appear in one year but not in another; examples would include items about local government in 1986 but not in 1996 and BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in 1996 but not in 1986. Such changes reflect time-bound issues and this makes it difficult to generalize about changing news priorities. Indeed, the data suggest that there is a fair degree of consistency in the sample years: domestic governmental and political subjects dominate both years. Such items, covering topics as diverse as transport, health, education and defence, made up a significant proportion of the items coded in both years. In 1986, 77 percent of primary political items coded for the *Telegraph* fell into that broad category, and 78 percent of all items in 1996. For *The Guardian*, the figures were slightly larger: 84 percent and 81 percent respectively, while those for the *Financial Times* at 72 percent and 78 percent respectively were a little lower.

There are undoubtedly some variations within this broad category but these are not large. To take just one example, the subject of 'sleaze', here defined as scandals and allegations of misconduct, appeared twice in *The Daily Telegraph* sample in 1986 and only five times in 1996. What is more apparent from these data is the 'thinning out' of political subjects: the proportions of subject categories are often similar across the two years *but there are just fewer items overall in 1996* for both *The Guardian* and the *Telegraph*.

One other way of illustrating this and also the way in which parliament has been displaced as a main source of news and events is to

look at the number of items appearing on the front pages of the newspapers in question.

In the last 10 years, British newspapers have restructured themselves in such a way as to demote text in favour of larger headlines and more, and larger, photographs. This is also true though to a lesser extent of German newspapers. This change has impacted on the amount of political information carried by newspapers and so must be seen as part of a larger process in which the place of politics within a newspaper is continually reassessed. Note, for example, the changing proportions of space devoted to text, headline and photographs in the sample of newspapers in the two years in question (Figure 3). With the exception of the *Financial Times*, the other newspapers carried less *text* relating to parliamentary and political news. However, in all three cases, there was a greater use of photographs and to a lesser extent of larger headlines.

Something similar has taken place with respect to the front pages of the British titles. For example, in 1986 *The Guardian* carried some six to eight news items on its front pages. By 1996, it usually carried around three news items. (The figure for 1966 is around a dozen news items.) The effects of these changes can be seen in Table 1, which shows how the number of political items carried on the front pages of a number of newspapers has declined. Once again, German data are offered for comparison, although it is important to point out that the drop in the percentage figure for the *FAZ* is a consequence of a very slight drop in the number of items on the front page and a large increase in the total number of items coded for that paper.

Perhaps more significant than the change identified in Table 1 is the change in the location and make-up of these items. A further breakdown of the data in Table 1 shows that although a small number of these items were mainly located in parliament itself, that number had further declined by 1996. In 1986, the *Telegraph* carried 15 such items, and *The Guardian* nine; by 1996, the respective figures were eight and three. Critically, the 1986 items were more likely to include a higher proportion of material, e.g. extracts of speeches or reports, drawn from parliament than the 1996 items. A more interpretive style of journalism which contextualizes and explains the significance of events has taken over from the more straightforward reportorial style of the 1980s. Clearly, further detailed longitudinal research is necessary in this field in order to begin to identify the more precise nature and patterns of change reported here.

One interpretation of these data could be that whereas in 1986 one could find in the *Telegraph* a front-page news item mainly dealing with

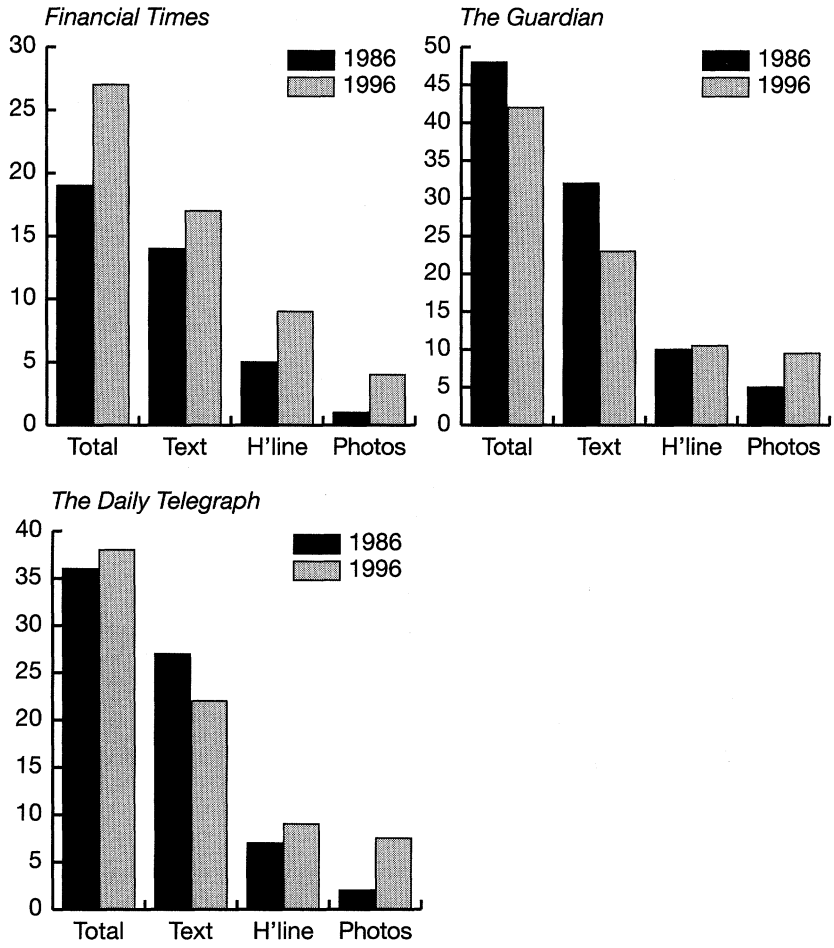


Figure 3 Total size of items by text, headline and photo space (in thousands of cm^2); all primary and parliamentary items

parliamentary events on an average of one per day (less so for *The Guardian*), by 1996 the average was one per two days (one per five days for *The Guardian*). This, and the changing make-up of the items, begins to point to the changed status of parliament as a source of news and events and leads one to understand the contemporary malaise about the reporting of parliaments.

A similar analysis for all parliamentary and primary political items confirms this pattern. Figure 4 shows how many of the items were mainly or entirely located in the respective parliamentary institutions. The

Table 1 The percentage of all coded items appearing on front pages of newspapers (percentages of *primary* political items carried on front page of the British press in parentheses)

	1986	*1996*
Financial Times	13	10
The Guardian	13 (21)	10 (13)
The Daily Telegraph	20 (25)	14 (18)
Suddeutsche Zeitung (SDZ)	13	10
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)	21	15

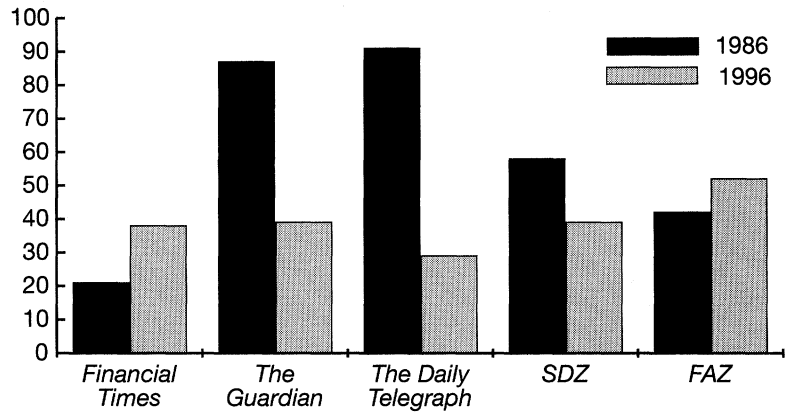


Figure 4 Number of primary political and parliamentary items taking place mainly or wholly in the British parliament and the Bundestag

differences between papers and countries reveal, once more, the lessening importance of parliament as a location of news for the two British broadsheets in particular but also for the *SDZ*.

Figure 5 adds another level of detail to these data although there are some important differences between the three British newspapers. The percentage of items with a general parliamentary focus has declined for both *The Guardian* and the *Telegraph*, as did the percentage of items located in the House of Lords. This is undoubtedly a consequence of the disappearance of the parliamentary items by 1996. However, the data show that there was greater interest in parliamentary committees and in Downing Street as a location of news. 'Governments or departments' as locations of news also increased a little in importance for one paper (*The Guardian*) but decreased for the other (the *Telegraph*). The *Financial Times*

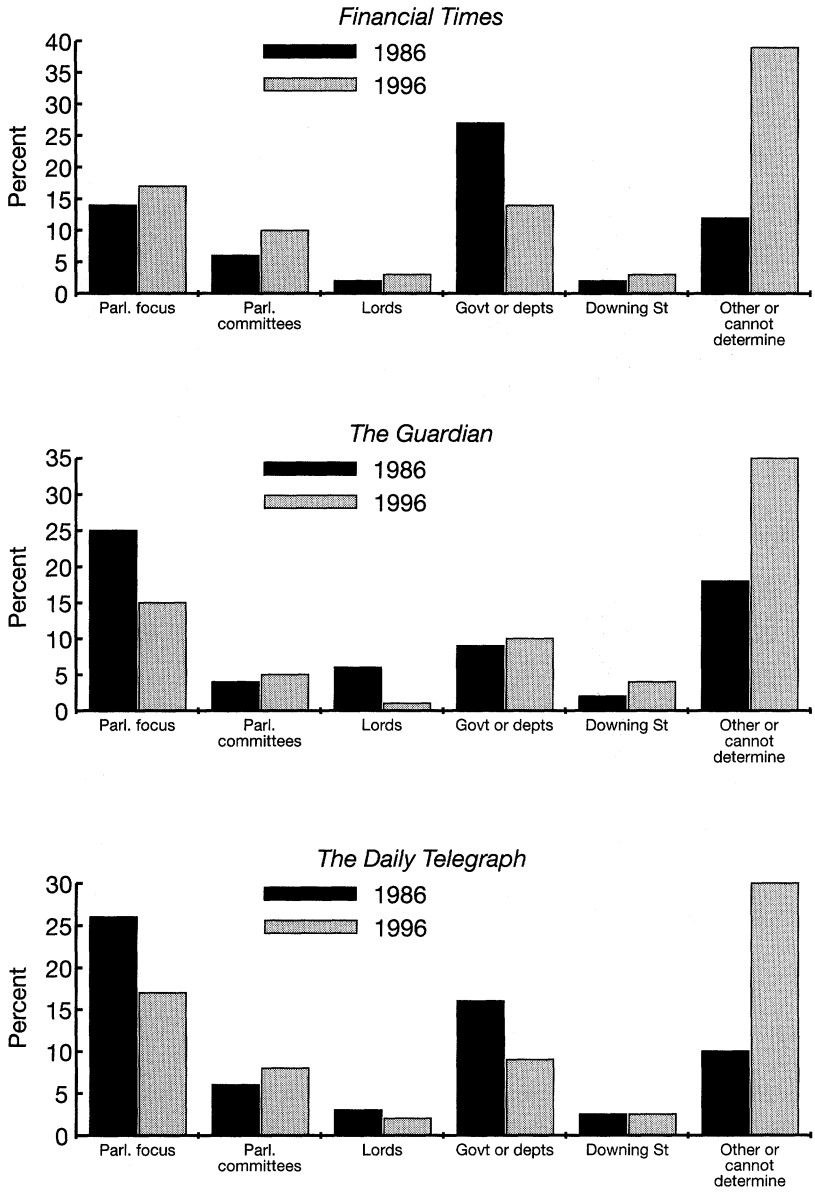
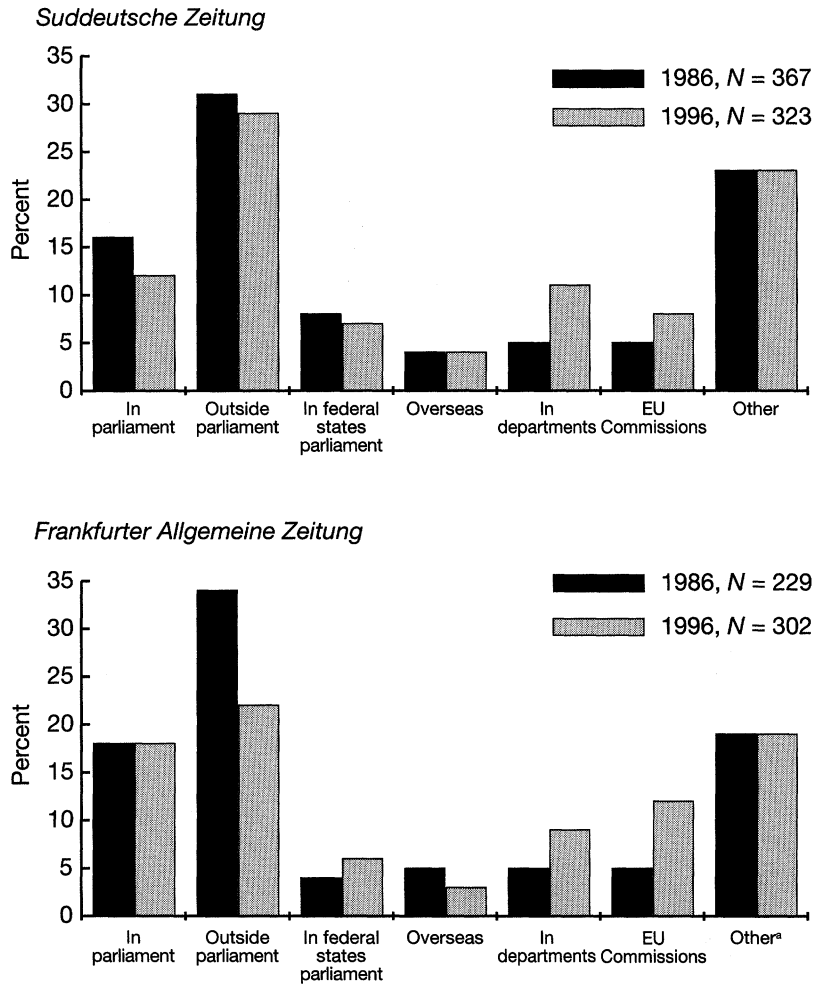


Figure 5 Percentage of items located in five main political locations; all primary and parliamentary items coded

generally replayed this pattern but also had a larger percentage of items with a parliamentary location in 1996 than in 1986. Comparative figures



[a] Includes cases where data indeterminate or not applicable.

Figure 6 Percentage of primary political items in different locations (figures relate to 97 percent of all items for *SDZ*, and 96 percent for *FAZ*)

for the German newspapers can be found in Figure 6 and these show a difference between the two papers with respect to the parliamentary location of items: *SDZ* has fewer such items in 1996 than in 1986, though the *FAZ* has the same percentage of items in both years. Other changes are, more or less, in the same direction, e.g. a greater focus on the European Union.

From this one could argue that there is a disinterest in certain forms of parliamentary coverage, e.g. debates, and venues, e.g. the House of Lords, alongside a slight increase in interest in other types of coverage and venues, e.g. committees, the EU. Nevertheless, the lack of interest in the former category has had important consequences, as the next sections illustrate.

The loss of the parliamentary page items Parliamentary items generally dealt with debates and events taking place within the House of Commons and more specifically within the Chamber itself. Today, as in 1996, 'newsworthy' debates and events would find their way into the newspaper. But in 1986, they could make two appearances: once in their own right on the parliamentary page and once as items worthy of, say, a front-page lead. More often than not, they would simply appear in their own right on the parliamentary page. These, as Figure 2 shows, were commonplace.

In a separate analysis of the collected data, all the items appearing on the parliamentary page on five separate days were examined in detail for both the *Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. Of 36 such items in the *Telegraph*, six (17 percent) were also mentioned on other pages. For *The Guardian*, 28 items appeared on the parliamentary page with nine (32 percent) also mentioned on other pages. One can draw two conclusions from this. First, that the dedicated parliamentary space allowed for a great diversity of topics to be aired. Their disappearance has thus eliminated a range of news items. Second, the appearance of items about the same topics on two newspaper sites, for example on the parliamentary page and on the front page, confirms how much more central parliamentary content was in the general political coverage of newspapers in 1986 as compared to 1996.

Appearances by MPs Finally, the demise of the British parliamentary page has made it more difficult for British MPs to gain publicity for their sayings and actions. This too reflects the general sense of the marginalization of parliament.

Since each individually named political actor mentioned in an item was coded in the order in which they appeared, it is possible to assess their prominence across the sample. Not surprisingly, governments and members of the governing party dominate the order of placements across newspapers. Lesser parties, including opposition parties, have a much lower visibility. The data also reveal that politicians closest to the centre of political power are referred to most often. These findings lend support

to some notion of a 'hierarchy' of power and it does emphasize the way criteria of newsworthiness tend to militate against 'lesser' MPs obtaining any significant coverage.

But with fewer primary political items in 1996 compared with 1986 *and* no parliamentary page in 1996, the overall number of different MPs making an appearance in the newspapers has decreased. In 1986, a total of 123 different MPs were quoted directly or indirectly in *The Guardian* and a total of 120 in the *Telegraph*. By 1996, these figures had declined to 93 and 78 respectively. (These figures relate to primary and parliamentary items only.) The changing nature of two of the three British newspapers in the sample has therefore had a significant impact on the chances of the parliamentary contributions of MPs being made public through some of the major channels of political communication.

If these changes are taken together they confirm not only the marginalization of parliament as a source and location of news and events but also a general 'downgrading' of parliamentary and political coverage in at least two out of the three British newspapers sampled. Would this pattern be found in the broadcast media?

Television news coverage of parliamentary institutions

British broadcasters had fought a long battle with politicians before they were eventually permitted to take their cameras into the House of Commons in 1989. Prior to that, broadcast news items would often carry sound-only extracts from the House — radio was allowed into the House in 1978 — and these would be accompanied by photographs of the politicians speaking.

This very short history of television in the House immediately suggests that one is still, in 1996 or even in 1999, dealing with a developing relationship. Nevertheless, even in the mid-1990s there was already some evidence that the television coverage of parliament was itself being reviewed. Nicholas Jones, one of the BBC's political correspondents, pointed out that 'after an initial burst of enthusiasm, when a wide range of news stories were being illustrated with shots of backbench MPs speaking or challenging ministers, the editors of the peak-time news bulletins also became rather bored with pictures of the chamber. As a result they too tended to become more sparing in their use of parliamentary footage.' Spectacular set-pieces apart, 'run-of-the-mill parliamentary coverage rarely made its way into the news' (Jones, 1996: 16). Was this a disenchantment with visually unexciting images or a

reflection of the changes that were taking place in the news priorities of the press, or both?

In order to explore those issues, two full, and non-consecutive, weeks of broadcast news drawn from the sample years of 1986 and 1996 were analysed. The years were the same as those for the newspaper sample and were chosen to straddle the seminal year of 1989; as for the nature of the sample, since British television news is difficult to collect — there is no public national archive — it was decided to concentrate resources on two full weeks of coverage rather than on a rolling week sample. This produced a sample of 10 news bulletins for BBC1, ITN's *News at Ten*, Channel 4 and Sky News and a parallel sample for Germany's ARD and ZDF.

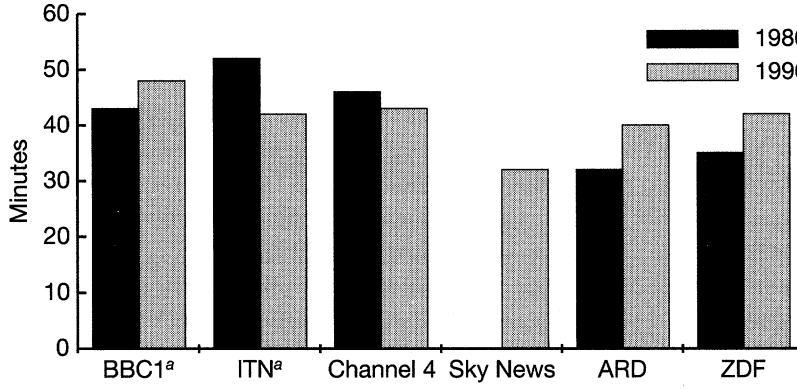
As with the analysis of the press, those items which could be defined as 'parliamentary and political' (see definition earlier) were coded as either primarily political (i.e. items which involved parliament or MPs in a major capacity) or as secondarily political (i.e. items which involved parliament or MPs in a minor capacity). Table 2 gives a breakdown of the number of items coded for the main British television news bulletins. For the main terrestrial services of BBC1, ITN's *News at Ten* and *Channel 4 News* there has been a 15 percent reduction in the total number of items coded, although, as Figure 7 shows, parliamentary and political items continue to be prominent in the top running order of these news bulletins. However, in 1996, Sky News — which was not available in 1986 — carried fewer political items than the terrestrial channels and fewer such items featured as top news stories. Importantly, Table 2 also begins to suggest that Sky News, a very commercial, non public service news programme, has a different news agenda.

The total number of items which included audio or audio/visual material from the Chamber increased between 1986 and 1996 from 12 to

Table 2 Primary political news items in 10-day broadcast sample of main evening news programmes, 1986 and 1996

News programme	*1986 items*	*1996 items*
BBC1	34[a]	30
News at Ten	31	23[a]
Channel 4	46	41
Sky News	[b]	18[a]

[a] One programme missing.
[b] Data not available.

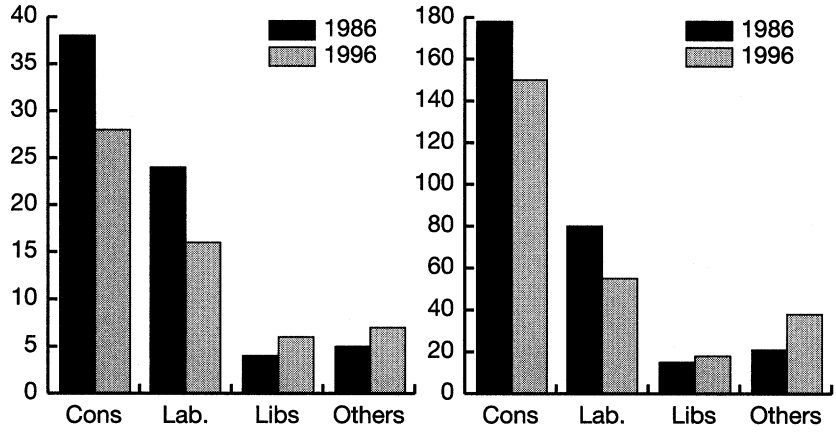


[a] Nine days of data for both BBC1 in 1986 and ITN in 1996.

Figure 7 Percentage of primary political items appearing as first, second or third in the bulletin running order

46 (out of 111 and 94 items respectively) and within these items the total number of seconds recorded in the Commons increased from 451 seconds to 1515 seconds, a three-fold increase. These figures illustrate the importance of the introduction of television cameras for news producers, confirming Jones's earlier comments. Future research would lend support, or otherwise, to the reported 'boredom' with visuals from the House which Nicholas Jones reported.

The data from Germany, as for Britain, confirm the continuing high profile that political news has within news bulletins (Figure 7; see also Mayntz, 1993; Schatz, 1992) but this conceals a drop in the number of items coded: 67 items down to 36 for ARD, 63 down to 54 for ZDF. A decline in the coverage of political news on German television was also recorded by Barbara Pfetsch (1996) in her own study of changes in German television news. Pfetsch sought to discover whether public and private broadcasters were converging with respect to their coverage of political content and her findings, on the whole, tend to support such an interpretation. According to Pfetsch, the public broadcasters had reduced their political coverage to a level which approaches that of the private broadcasters. In 1985/6, 'the public stations dedicated 74% of the overall air-time to political news events on occasions that had a clear reference to the established political institutions and actors' (Pfetsch, 1996: 442). The commercial channels devoted 56 percent of their overall air time. By 1993, the two types of service had converged to around the 52–53 percent mark, respectively.



Figures 8a and 8b Number of different political actors appearing in primary news items (left), and total number of times political actors from all parties appear in news items (right). British television news on BBC1 news, ITN's *News at Ten* and *Channel 4 News*.

This displacement of, and reduction in, political news shows how exposed such content can be to commercial forces. And, as with the press, the change often impacts on who is covered and how.

As in the press, the political party in government obtains by far the greatest percentage of coverage and the leaders of government parties are more dominant than those of other parties. But other changes are noteworthy and in particular the narrowing of access for MPs in Britain. The extent of the change for the major British political parties can be seen in Figures 8a and 8b, which set out the number of *different* political actors appearing in the news items and the total *number of times* political actors from all the parties appeared in the bulletin. Figure 8a thus counts *actors*, while Figure 8b counts the number of *appearances*. Both tell a similar story.

The reduction in numbers recorded in these two figures is paralleled by a reduction in the amount of time that party political actors were 'seen and heard' (i.e. seen speaking) across all three main news bulletins. Figure 9 shows the pattern for BBC1 though both *Channel 4 News* and ITN's *News at Ten* produce similar results. In effect, then, fewer parliamentarians are seen in the news bulletins and they are seen speaking for less time than in 1986. This finding is similar to findings by Pfetsch: in her study, she found that in 1985/6, 16.1 percent of the total time devoted to political news events on the public stations was taken up by parliamentary

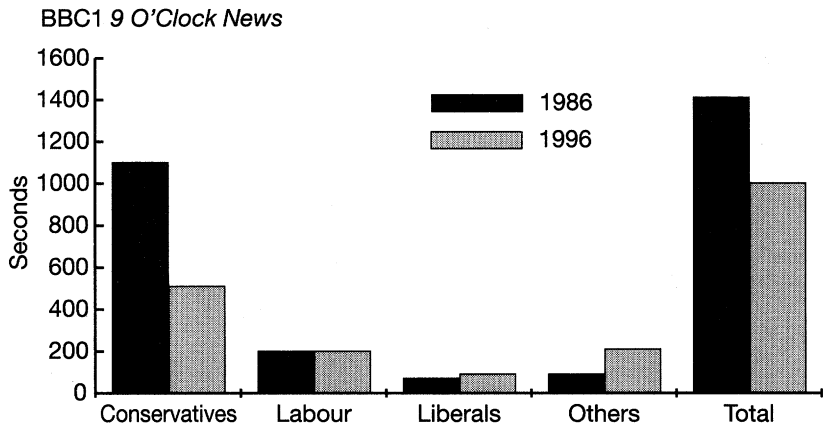


Figure 9 Political actors 'seen and heard' in primary news items on BBC1, by political party (excluding House of Lords)

debates. By 1993, this had decreased to 11.7 percent. Politicians' speeches suffered a similar fate with a recorded decrease from 17.1 to 6.6 percent. In both cases, the recorded decreases were taking place within a decrease in the total amount of time devoted to political news events (Pfetsch, 1996: 442).

One significant departure from the pattern identified in Figure 9 is that the decrease recorded has not affected the appearances of the two main British political party leaders (Thatcher/Major for the Conservative Party and Kinnock/ Blair for the Labour Party). If anything, it could be argued that, in media terms, the British political party leaders have become *more* dominant within their parties: while Prime Minister Thatcher took up 15 percent of all time taken up by members of the Conservative Party on BBC1 in 1986, the respective figure for John Major in 1996 was 34 percent. The parallel figures for the Opposition Leader on BBC1 are 15 percent and 60 percent. That same pattern is repeated for the other two channels. These are perhaps the sorts of set-pieces which, according to Jones, continue to interest news producers.

The findings from the German data provide a different picture. As Figure 10 shows, the number of appearances by parliamentarians has increased in all cases but one across the years in question. Certain political figures feature often across the two channels and the two years of the sample but there is little sense of these political figures featuring so prominently as to dwarf all others. The chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and a selection of ministers or contenders for high office appear most often both

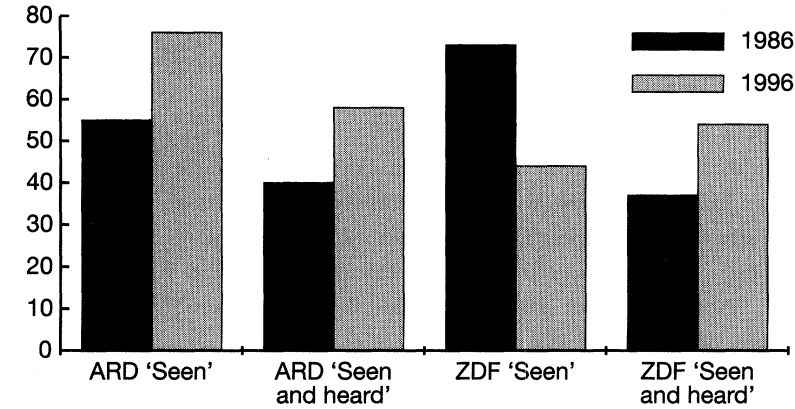


Figure 10 Number of appearances by German parliamentarians in all political items

in 1986 and in 1996 and, together, they account for some 30 percent of all appearances.

In spite of the increased number of appearances, the German data, like the British data, show a decrease in the amount of time each of the appearances by parliamentarians takes up on the television screen. Averaging out the total length of all the appearances by the number of appearances produces the data which are featured in Figure 11. These represent the average length of the contributions and show a decrease in the length of time each one takes up between the two sample years.

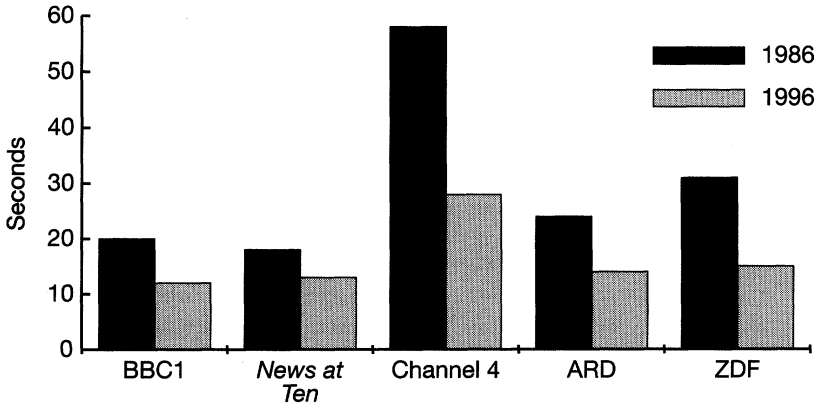


Figure 11 Average length of 'seen and heard' appearance

Explaining the changes

The data reveal similarities and differences between newspapers and broadcast media, within and across the two countries. No one single pattern is apparent across all media and countries although some things appear to be pointing in the same direction: for example, the shorter extracts from politicians which are now common in broadcast news, the fall in the number of political news items and so on. As regards the press, there are differences within and across countries: the *Financial Times* differs from the other British papers and often the *SDZ* displays a different pattern from the *FAZ*.

Nevertheless, in a longer historical narrative there have been some important changes from past practices and it seems highly unlikely that in the future we shall see a return to these. But what accounts for the more significant changes documented earlier?

One explanation can be found in Timothy Cook's account of why the press moved away from the gallery style of reporting the details of discussions and policies and towards more 'colour and excitement' (Cook, 1989: 22). A more commercial approach to newspapers and a greater attention paid to the requirements of the readers inevitably injured parliamentary coverage. This was, in essence, the same analysis as was offered by both Stephen Koss and Alan Lee in respect of the British press. But the logic of this approach, it could be argued, could also be applied to the broadcast media, as well as to media in other countries: ordinary images of debates are not enough, what is necessary is a sharper focus on news stories and livelier and more exciting imagery (see Jones, 1996: 18–19). Such a view could be found in statements made to us by a German parliamentary correspondent and by a French television producer.

> Today, unlike previous days when the reporting was more conventional and sympathetic and there was simply more straightforward reproduction, you have to put the material into a journalistic form. You have to adapt the material in order to convey the essential information from the flood of news. (German parliamentary correspondent, interview, 1997)

> We deal with parliament when we feel that something is happening, that a subject has to be covered. As far as the editorial staff is concerned, parliamentary news is boring but there is a lot of other news that is also boring. Viewers are not really interested in parliamentary items. I don't think this is due to the institutional dimension of such news. Items on parliament always look the same and this may be part of the explanation: the Right will be in favour of a bill, but the Left will oppose it. So it's not

> worth reporting. Consequently, we just report on parliament when debates occur within the Left or within the Right. (French television producer, interview, 1997)

One could argue that such changes in practices could not have taken place independently of political changes in, and surrounding, parliaments. This can only be a partial explanation for, as we have seen, the decline in parliamentary coverage has a long history and takes in much more than any single event or series of events which could be interpreted as downgrading parliament's political role. And certain contemporary factors may have accelerated the media's lessened interest in parliament: the sight of empty parliamentary benches, the rise of a more powerful executive in charge of the parliamentary agenda, and the greater control exercised over individual MPs have all been offered as reasons for the lack of coverage. While these have undoubtedly forced the media to rethink their coverage, it is also possible that these are no more than justifications for actions already taken. Were there no empty benches in earlier decades?

A second explanation for the changes recorded here lies in the ever changing news priorities. Drawing on his own research on the American media, Stephen Hess has suggested that 'the [newspaper's] home office had a vision of what *consumers* wanted that differed from the opinions of the field office [the journalists]' (Hess, 1994: 146; emphasis in original). One obvious result of this would be not only a downgrading of congressional news in the broadcast and print media (see, for example, Kimball, 1994) but also 'a re-evaluation of what is news on the part of the mainstream American publications' (Kimball, 1994: 147). Newspapers and television, according to Hess (1994: 148), 'are now almost as likely to feature stories about business, education, health, religion, or culture as about what is happening in Congress and the other branches of government'.

We can get a glimpse of this in Table 1, which sets out the proportion of 'parliamentary and political' items which featured on the front pages of the sample of newspapers. If there has been a change in news priorities and a greater interest in what readers wanted — as well as greater interest in how to attract readers — this would emerge in the data. By redesigning the front pages and reducing the prominence of politics on those pages, newspapers are sending out different signals about their aims and objectives and about their appeal to readers, and their 'seriousness'.

A third explanation reflects the adaptation of one medium to another. Journalists interviewed for this project often suggested that since

broadcast media offered a window on parliaments — extracts from speeches in news programmes, countless interviews with politicians, 24-hour news channels and the like — newspapers could perhaps focus more beneficially on explanation and interpretation.

These three explanations suggest that there were, and are, strong organizational and journalistic arguments for not carrying parliamentary and political news as before. Contained within them is also an argument about the changing importance of parliamentary institutions *sui generis* as sources of news and events. Consequently, the underlying causes of changes in parliamentary and political coverage reside in a combination of things: a changing media world ('commercialization', 'visualization', 'tabloidization'), a changing parliamentary framework (more powerful executive, absent MPs, other locations of power, etc.) and a changing interplay between the two continually evolving worlds of the media and politics in which the media are more focused on the search for the newsworthy, the exciting and the visually entertaining. The outcome of all these changes is the current state of political and parliamentary coverage.

Summary and conclusion

The findings reported here have focused on the changing nature of parliamentary coverage in both the press and television from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Although the argument has focused on the marginalization of parliament as a source of news for the press and broadcast media, there is another dimension of this argument which also deserves to be mentioned, namely, the consequences of this marginalization of parliament for the availability of *information* about parliament, about legislation and all the other aspects of parliamentary work. As we have seen in relation to the demise of the parliamentary page, what has been lost has not only been the extracts of speeches but the extracts of speeches, among other things, *about a range of issues*. The media, in this part of the argument, are not only about providing news, *contra* Simon Jenkins; they are also about making *information* available to their readers. Some of that information may be newsworthy, some may not, but to make newsworthiness the only criterion for selection negates other possible roles for the media.

One gets a better grasp of the significance of this point when considering the place of the newer information and communication technologies in the relationship between parliaments and their public. With the development of the Internet, most parliaments are now able to

create sites which contain information about the full range of their activities, including sites where debates and committee reports can be found — things which now only get a mention, if that, in the traditional media. These sites are available to a wide public although, unlike the traditional mass media, the 'costs of entry' are much higher. One major advantage of such sites, though, is their ability to provide 'surveillance' of parliamentary affairs, something which the traditional media have increasingly not done as they have cut back on parliamentary coverage.

Finally, a paradox: despite the 'ups and downs' in coverage and the attraction of new technologies, political actors still continue to occupy a prominent place in the media, even in the British media. A drop in the number of items, thus, reflects a recasting of the relationship between the press and parliament and a redefinition of what 'serious' newspapers are all about. Both the media and parliaments have changed and it should thus come as no surprise that the nature of the coverage has also changed: which brings us full circle to the sorts of questions posed at the Athens conference: should *parliamentarians themselves* be concerned about their public face? Should they be concerned about journalistic assessments of the importance and significance of their role and their institution? And, if so, what can they do about those concerns?

Notes

The research was generously funded by the Headley Trust, London, and the work was supervised by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London. I am grateful to both for their assistance. The research has been published by Pinter/ Cassell in association with the Royal Institute of International Affairs as a Chatham House Paper *Parliament and the Media* (October 1998).

1. French broadcast and print media were also analysed for the original project but data are not reported here.
2. All political news items were coded. Features, cartoons, editorials and the like were not. Items 'in brief' were also excluded from the analysis.
3. I am grateful to the Social Science Research Committee of the University of Leicester for their financial assistance to undertake this work.

References

Committee on Standards in Public Life (Chair: Lord Nolan) (1995) *First Report. Vol. 2; Transcripts of Oral Evidence*, Cm 2850-II. London: HMSO.

Cook, T.E. (1989) *Making Laws and Making News Media Strategies in the US House of Representatives*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Franklin, B. (1995) 'Parliament on the Spike?', paper given at the Political Studies Association, University of York, April.

Franklin, B. (1997) *Newszak and News Media*. London: Arnold.

Hennis, W. (1971) 'Reform of the Bundestag: The Case for General Debate', pp. 65–79 in G. Loewenberg (ed.) *Modern Parliaments. Change or Decline*. New York: Aldine.

Hess, S. (1994) 'The Decline and Fall of Congressional News', pp. 141–57 in T. Mann and N. Orenstein (eds) *Congress, the Press, and the Public*. Washington, DC: AEI/Brookings Institution.

Jones, N. (1996) *Sound Bites and Spin Doctors*. London: Indigo.

Kimball, P. (1994) *Downsizing the News*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Koss, S. (1990) *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press*. London: Fontana Press.

Lee, A. (1976) *The Origins of the Popular Press 1855–1914*. London: Croom Helm.

McDonald, S. (1994) *The Guardian* 14 December.

Mayntz, G. (1993) 'Dokumentation und Kurzanalysen. Die Fernsehberichterstattung uber den Detschen Bundestag. Eine Bilanz', *Zeitschrift fur Parlaimentsfragen* 3/93 (Documentation and Brief Analysis [Summary]. Summary of Television Reportage of the German Lower House).

Negrine, R. (1998) *Television and the Press since 1945*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Oberreuter, H. (1990) 'The *Bundestag* and Media in the Federal Republic of Germany', pp. 517–36 in U. Thaysen, R. Davidson and R. Livingston (eds) *The US Congress and the German Bundestag*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Padioleau, J.-G. (1985) *Le Monde et le Washington Post*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Pfetsch, B. (1996) 'Convergence Through Privatization? Changing Media Environments and Televised Politics in Germany', *European Journal of Communication* 11(4): 427–52.

President of the French Senate (1998) 'Les Medias, Nos Allies Objectifs', paper presented at the conference 'Parliament and the Media', Athens.

Schatz, H. (1992) 'Televising the Bundestag', pp. 234–53 in B. Franklin (ed.) *Televising Democracies*. London: Routledge.

Seymour-Ure, C. (1979) 'Parliament and Mass Communication in the Twentieth Century', pp. 527–95 in S. Walkland (ed.) *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Steed, W. (1938) *The Press*. London: Penguin.

Straw, J. (1993) *The Decline in Press Reporting of Parliament*. London.

Violante, L. (1998) 'Parliament and the Media', paper presented at conference 'Parliament and the Media', Athens.

Wilson, C. (1970) *Parliaments, Peoples and the Media*. London: Cassell.