

An overview of the UK media scene



What is the media?

A medium is any tool used to store and deliver information or data, and the word "media" is its plural.

Strictly speaking letters, telephones, e-mails, displays, CDs, film or motion pictures, the internet, books, and all the many digital media formats, are all media as they carry information from one person or organisation to another.

However what we are more likely to mean when we talk about "the media" tends to be the various means of mass communication media at our disposal, for example, television, radio, and newspapers.

As a collective term 'the media' is a little unhelpful, because it suggests it exists as a single homogenous body. In fact it is highly factionalised with dozens of sectors working to their own agendas and styles.

The differences between all the different sectors and sections of the mass media are striking and the "Fourth Estate as it is sometimes known" is as diverse as Society itself, with every aspect of life reflected in the myriad of radio and TV shows, magazines and newspapers produced in the UK.

When confronted or contacted by these specific sections of the media, our response needs to be tailored to their particular needs. To do this we first have to understand them.

The Press

Newspapers

Newspapers exist to make a profit. The great majority of their income comes from advertising, so a newspaper is really a series of stories designed to encourage readers to buy a publication and see the advertising. In world terms, the UK population buys and reads more national newspapers than anywhere else.

But, even within this sector of the media, the

differences are wide: from the *The Sun* and the *Mirror* at the mass, tabloid end of the market, through *The Express* and the *Daily Mail* in the middle, to *The Independent*, *Guardian*, *Times*, *Financial Times* and *Telegraph* at the quality, broadsheet end. They all have market niches, they all have identified readerships, they all have political stances (generally with a small 'p', despite common mythology) and they all have agendas.

The national Sunday papers also form a category of their own. Whilst they carry some news, more of their pages are devoted to 'comment' and 'opinion'. The object of this (at least in the qualities) is to provide the buyer with a product which can last all week. *Sunday Times* or *Observer* supplements can often be seen still being read on the Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week.

Agendas are not necessarily pre-set as long-term strategies by the upper echelons of senior editors, or indeed owners. In fact, more often than not, they are set by what their rivals do or by other extraneous and external factors.

We may think we 'know' about the national press, but there are also more than 100 regional daily papers, add to this the weekly 'paid for' and 'free' titles, and they can be just as important to organisations wanting to get their message across to a wide audience.

Finally there are also the specialist weekly newspapers such as the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* or *Rugby Times* which bridge the strange gap between 'newspaper' and 'magazine'. They want to be seen as newspapers because that brings with it the cachet of immediacy and topicality, but they also carry a large proportion of 'features' material more commonly found in the specialist magazines.

Magazines

Think of just about any subject or area of activity or interest and you'll probably find a magazine devoted to it.

At present, there are just over 7000 maga-

zine titles in print in the UK. Each year a couple of hundred close and a couple of hundred new ones pop up, attempting to find a market niche or directly competing with an existing title or titles.

Magazines are broadly split into two sectors, consumer magazines and trade and technical titles. Consumer magazines are those with which we are most familiar, as these are the titles we see filling the shelves of newsagents. Trade and technical magazines are predominantly available on subscription, and whilst some may have limited availability on the news stands, their specialist readership gives them a real value as an important route in to specific audiences.

Generally magazines, whether consumer or trade and technical, do not aim at topicality in the same way as newspapers do, and what is called their lead time (the time it takes to produce) is much longer than a newspaper. They do however still carry news but this will be news which is so specific to their audience that they know that no one else will carry it, or news that the editor believes is a 'must' for his or her readers. Usually magazines carry 'features' which are an extended form of storytelling and/or explanation.

Within the large consumer magazine sector there are majority sections, such as 'women's magazines' like *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman*, and *Bella*, which sell vast numbers of copies of each issue. Then there is the 'general interest' sector, including lifestyle titles such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Company*, *Ideal Home*, which tend to be the very glossy monthlies.

One then moves into the specific interest market, which at present seems to be dominated by computer gaming magazines, followed closely by anything to do with motors and motoring, followed by the leisure and hobby areas.

Trade and technical magazines cover every profession and area of the economy from *Oil Heating News*, to *Aerospace Testing Interna-*

tional, from *Antiquarian Horology* to *Nursing Times*.

The Electronic Media

The electronic mass media are radio, TV and the web.

Like print media none of these forms of media are homogeneous. They are no more than a compilation of different programmes or sites with different objectives, often targeted at potentially quite different audiences.

Radio and TV are split between the BBC output and that of the independent broadcasters. But even within this split there is an enormous number of different output mechanisms.

Radio

On average people in the UK spend 20 hours each week listening to the radio.

There are more than 340 radio stations in the UK, and Radio is still a growing section of media. There are 56 more analogue stations in the UK now than there were 10 years ago and more than 30 new digital only stations. In the past five years time spent by people listening to radio has increased by 13 per cent.

BBC radio now has five national broadcast channels along with the World Service and a further five digital channels. In addition the BBC has a wide network of 61 local stations based in towns and their hinterlands, as well as regional/national stations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

All this output, which can range from little known jazz on Radio 3; to talk shows in Urdu; from the latest rap music; to science magazine programmes, is all tailored to 'the audience'.

This audience has been market researched and is constantly monitored by viewer and listener panels. Pro-programmes are continually evaluated on the basis of their position in the

audience ratings charts.

As in every part of the communications industry, little is left to chance and everything is planned with the objective of building, holding and expanding the audience.

Independent radio is another ball game. It consists of a small number of national stations like Classic FM, Virgin Radio and Talk Sport, as well as a large network of more than 300 local stations covering the rest of the UK. Most of these stations are designed to reach a younger audience and the characteristic feature of the great majority of them is pop music.

However, one of the requirements of the licenses they are all granted to transmit is that they have to carry news and contain an element of public service in their output. How this is interpreted varies, being shaped primarily by the listeners they are catering for. The key feature of these stations is that they earn their income from advertising – listeners' tastes drive the market.

As competition in this sector has grown, stations are increasingly attempting to cater for very specific interest groups amongst their potential audience. For instance, several of the coastal stations run programmes for the boating fraternity as well as giving very detailed shipping forecasts; in cities such as Bradford and Leicester where there are large Asian communities, individual stations and programmes are targeted in a very specific way, for instance broadcasting in Hindi and Urdu.

Specialist radio stations are also now expanding from their local roots however through digital output, which puts them on platforms such as Sky TV and the web, this gives them access to national and international audiences.

In news terms whether BBC or independent, a local radio station can be likened to a local newspaper. On the whole, the news has to be local to be of interest to the station, and phone-ins are akin to the 'Letters' page in

the local paper.

Television

Perhaps the foremost section of the media in many people's minds is Television, and despite the growth of interactive media like the internet TV certainly still has massive influence. 2008 figures from BARB (the Broadcasters Audience Research Board) showed that on average Britons watch three hours and 45 minutes of TV daily, that's more than 26 hours spent watching TV every week.

TV is a rapidly changing and developing medium, having undergone a massive expansion in output over the last ten years. There are now five terrestrial channels in the UK and literally hundreds of satellite and cable TV channels making a daunting array of media opportunities.

The buzz phrase of the late 1990's was "narrow-casting". No longer are programme makers, or even channel managers aiming to broadcast to millions of viewers with every programme as they did in the days when there were just four channels (two BBC and two independent).

Today, programmes and whole channels might be dedicated to small niche markets. On satellite and cable there are a vast range of channels, from *UK TV Food* showing cookery programmes for 18 hours a day to *Teachers TV*, a subscription service for teachers and people working in education.

Over recent years TV, and to a lesser extent radio, have undergone a revolution in the way programmes are produced. In the past most programmes were made by the channels or stations who were going to broadcast them, making it relatively easy to find the right person to talk to if you had a story or idea for a programme. Now they will quite likely be made by totally independent production companies – 25% of BBC output has to be sourced from independent TV production companies.

This means you might have to chase round a multitude of independent production companies to find out who is doing what and when.

The Internet

General news sites on the web are becoming increasingly influential. Some are merely electronic versions of their newspaper stable-mates such as the *Electronic Telegraph*. Other sites though, such as the *BBC News* site and the *Ananova* news site, carry their own stories and have their own journalists and correspondents.

Other sites carry news about specific professions or topics such as *HR Gateway* which carries stories about Human Resources issues such as recruitment. Time spent surfing the web can be well spent if it identifies websites which might carry stories from you or about your organisation.

In terms of timing, the web is like radio in that it can be constantly changed and updated. The *BBC News* website adds and drops stories throughout the day with the news content changing with events. Some websites even provide "tickertape" type services through RSS feeds, providing a constant on-screen update of the latest news. Other sites will be updated periodically and have editorial policies more like those seen in newspapers, with content staying on for longer periods between changes.